2012

How institutional theory informs state education policy regarding exit outcomes for students with disabilities

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HOW INSTITUTIONAL THEORY INFORMS STATE EDUCATION POLICY REGARDING EXIT OUTCOMES FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

A Dissertation

Presented to

The Faculty of the School of Education

The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Education

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by
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March 2012

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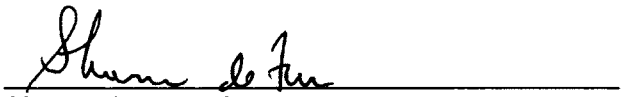

Sharon deFur, Ed.D

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to acknowledge the knowledgeable faculty and staff at the College of William and Mary for providing the supports needed to accomplish this goal. To my dissertation comprehensive committee Dr. Megan Tschannen-Moran, Dr. Sharon deFur and Dr. Lori Korinek, I appreciate the constructive criticism, time, and patience you provided during this process. I would like to especially express my appreciation of Dr. Brenda Williams and Dr. Tschannen-Moran whose feedback was so meaningful during critical times in my life.

I dedicate this dissertation to my family who provided constant encouragement and understanding as my studies often kept me away from family activities. I love you and thank you both for being the wind beneath my wings.

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HOW INSTITUTIONAL THEORY INFORMS STATE EDUCATION POLICY REGARDING EXIT OUTCOMES FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

ABSTRACT

As school districts negotiate accountability requirements imposed by federal and state policies regarding exit outcomes for students with disabilities, one strategic response has been to provide students with mild disabilities such as SLD, ED, and OHI with alternative routes to graduation (Goertz & Duffy, 2003; Guy, Shin & Lee, 1999; Johnson & Thurlow, 2003; Johnson, Thurlow, & Stout, 2007; Pankaskie & Webb, 1999). These alternatives made available by state policy may assist school districts to maintain legitimacy by meeting accountability targets and obtaining resources; however, unintended negative consequences may arise.

The purpose of this study was to examine the responses of school districts to educational policy regarding exit outcomes for students with disabilities. A mid-Atlantic state serving over 1.2 million students was the setting of the study.

The results of this study support institutional theory in that organizational change does not occur through coercive methods alone but also by similar responses to uncertainty influenced by environmental contexts. Significant relationships were found among exit outcomes and district context variables such as size, poverty level and reading and math proficiency. The size of the district was negatively related to the Modified Standard Diploma, Special Diploma, and GED. Poverty was negatively related to the Standard Diploma and positively related to the Special Diploma.

The reading and math proficiency of the district was positively related to the Standard Diploma and negatively related to the Special Diploma.

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How Institutional Theory Informs State Education Policy Regarding Exit Outcomes for Students with Disabilities

CHAPTER 1

The creation of common schooling in the United States established a system of shared beliefs of social inclusion, opportunity, and advancement for most school-aged children (Meyer, 2006) that developed, over time, into a deeply-ingrained belief that better schools make a stronger society (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). The formal structure of schooling builds legitimacy by mirroring the cultural beliefs, rules, and laws in society (Scott, 1995). The resources and effectiveness of public schools are based upon adhering to society's belief regarding the structure of classes, courses, and degrees offered. Creating a ceremonial ritual such as graduation with diploma credentials sends the message to students and others that a payoff exists for completion of the established curriculum, thereby reinforcing the social effectiveness of schools (Meyer, 1977). The accountability movement has challenged long-held beliefs regarding the value of graduating with a diploma and the ability of public education to exit graduates with necessary skills to perform in the work or postsecondary environment (Pfeffer & Salancik 1978).

During the 1940s, 85% of adults believed students were getting a good education. By 1974, results of Gallup public opinion surveys rated school performance as B- decreasing to a C- by 1981 (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). Dissatisfaction heightened when the National Commission on Educational Excellence published a *Nation at Risk* (1983) criticizing educational outcomes with the somber assertion that for the first time; the educational progress of one generation would not surpass or even come near that of their parents (NCEE, 1983). The regression of public opinion regarding the lack of academic rigor presented a political concern since investments in formal education accounted for almost 30% of U.S. economic growth after the postwar period (Dorn 2003). The knowledge and skill level of

graduates represented raw materials needed to compete in foreign markets; therefore, essential to a free democratic society (NCEE, 1983).

The reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in 2001 focused the scrutiny of federal policymakers on equity and effectiveness in public education. Significant standard and accountability expectations existed for all states receiving federal funds, not just those schools with high concentrations of poor children. Under ESEA (2001), the federal government became the core of a high-stakes accountability system for all schools, districts, and states. States were now responsible for developing a plan based on assessments, and ensuring continual linear progress toward proficiency in local educational agencies. Failure to do so meant facing federal sanctions.

Although ESEA (2001) is in the process of reauthorization, the climate of accountability in public education remains. In 2010, U.S. Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, testified before Senate and House committees emphasizing the need for continued educational reform with the following statistics:

- 27% of teenagers drop out of high school nationwide
- 15-year-olds scored 24th out of 29 developed countries on international tests of math literacy and 17th out of 29 developed countries in science
- Only 40% of graduates continue to postsecondary education
- Once ranked first in the world in college completion for 25-34-year-olds, the United States now ranks in 10th place (Duncan, 2011).

The accountability environment shapes the context in which federal, state, and local educational agencies operate. Each level of government operates as an agent of public welfare meeting its public definition of adequate service and service outcomes while

balancing external constraints (Bidwell, 1965). Institutional theory asserts that organizations are mainly interested in predictability and survival (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Zucker, 1977). The desire to survive leads organizations to comply with other actors on which they depend for resources and legitimacy (DiMaggio, 1988; Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). Since the federal government exerts regulatory authority and allocates fiscal resources to state governments who in turn regulate and allocate resources to local educational agencies, an interdependent relationship is sustained among the three levels of government. Consequently, state and local resources are influenced by the level of adherence to federal mandates. Therefore, as the accountability movement has focused on exit outcomes at the federal level, states have focused on narrowing existing achievement gaps in localities to ensure the value of the high school diploma remains consistent with public expectations of knowledge and skill attainment.

Strategic Responses of States

According to Meyer and Rowan (1983), institutionalized services and policies function as myths that organizations ceremonially adopt to increase legitimacy or the appearance of alignment with relevant beliefs and laws. True conformity, however, often conflicts with efficiency criteria, so organizations adopt strategies that create gaps between their formal structures and their actual work activities (Meyer & Rowan, 1983).

While ESEA (2001) does not require that assessments be used as a requirement of promotion or graduation, it does require the graduation rate to be an indicator at the high school level for determining whether districts are making adequate yearly progress (Anderson 2005; Johnson & Thurlow 2003). As a strategic response to mandatory testing, several states linked graduation to the passage of an exit examination. By 2003,

approximately half the country had mandatory exit exams requirements as a condition of receiving a standard diploma (Goertz & Duffy, 2003; Guy, Shin & Lee, 1999; Johnson & Thurlow, 2003; Johnson, Thurlow, & Stout, 2007; Pankaskie & Webb, 1999).

While state agencies claimed to move forward ensuring that the standard or regular high school diploma is related to a student's knowledge and skills, a concurrent strategic response involved the creation of various credentials such as diplomas and certificates. These documents modified curriculum requirements but allowed more students to exit school with some type of documentation (Guy, Shin & Lee, 1999; Johnson & Thurlow, 2003; Johnson, Thurlow, Cosio & Bremer, 2005; Johnson, Thurlow, Stout & Mavis, 2007; Vernon, Baytops, McMahon, Padden & Walther-Thomas, 2003). In 2007, thirty-three states offered a variety of other differentiated diploma options for students which include honors diplomas, IEP/special education diplomas, certificates of attendance, certificates of achievement, occupational diplomas, or a variation of previously listed options (Johnson et al, 2007).

Impact of Accountability on Students with Disabilities

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA, 2004) requires student participation in the district and state assessments. In addition, state special education departments are required to select graduation targets for students with disabilities and report outcome data each year to the Secretary of Education (Johnson, Thurlow, Stout & Mavis, 2007; Johnson & Thurlow, 2003). In an attempt to meet federal guidelines, more states are using testing as a measure to fulfill requirements of IDEA and ESEA.

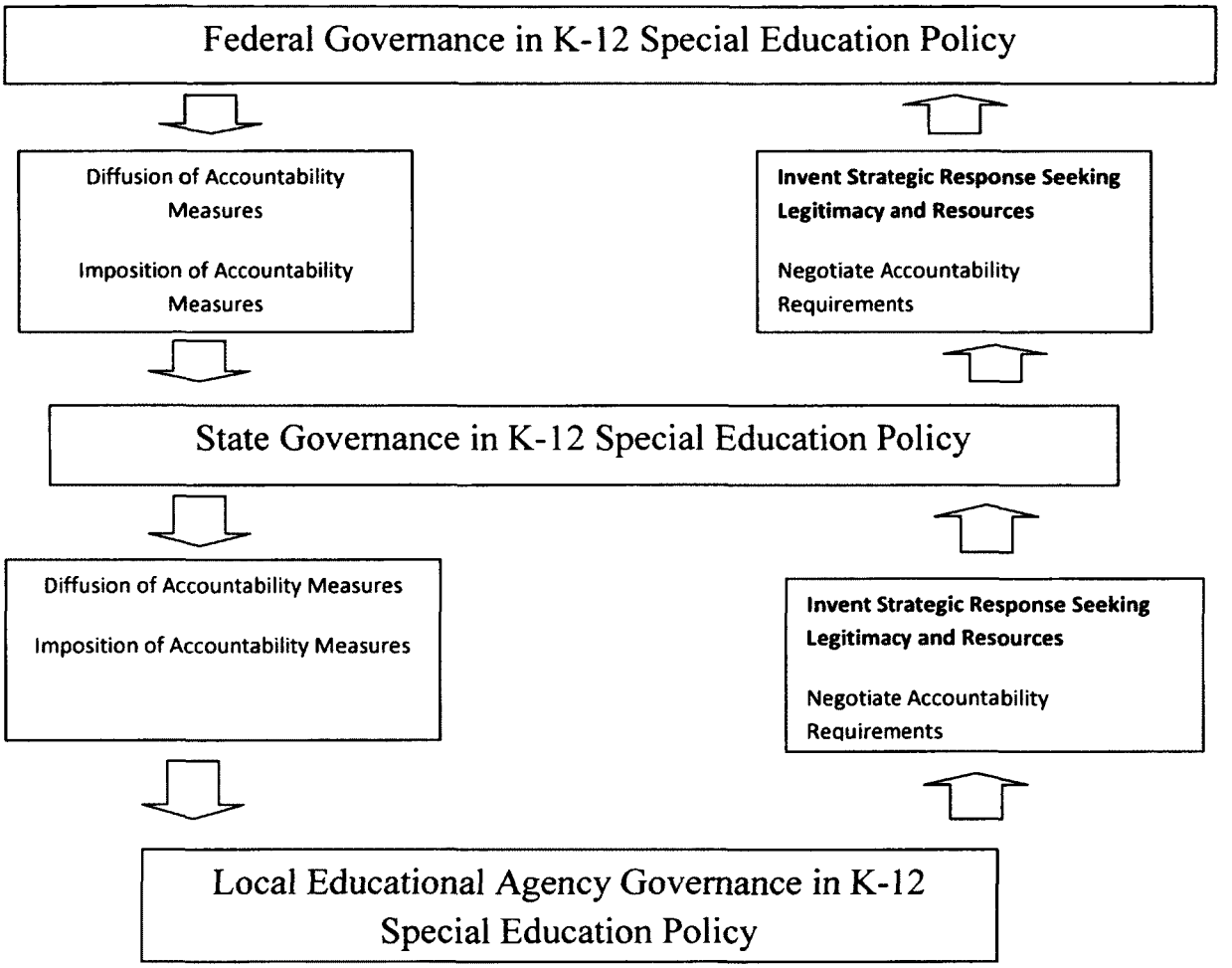
According to Johnson and Thurlow (2003), tests become "high stakes" when used to determine promotion and retention or whether a high school diploma will be awarded. This

places increased pressure on students with disabilities already facing challenges accessing the general curriculum (Johnson, Thurlow, Stout & Mavis, 2007). In addition, some alternative diploma options are offered only to students with disabilities although there is little empirical evidence on how these documents will affect access to postsecondary education or future employment and earnings (Johnson & Thurlow, 2003).

The accountability movement focuses on creating outcomes for students with disabilities through regulatory processes. Shaped by this environment, the federal, state and local educational agencies respond to demands in strategic ways to garner resources and social legitimacy. The conceptual framework proposes an interdependent relationship between levels of government and special education policy in K-12 education (Figure 1).

Figure 1.

Conceptual Framework



Source: Adapted from Scott (1994)

Statement of the Problem

School districts negotiate accountability requirements imposed by federal and state policies regarding exit outcomes for students with disabilities. One strategic response has been to provide students with mild disabilities such as Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD), Emotional Disabilities (ED) and Other Health Impairments (OHI) with alternative routes to graduation. These alternatives made available by state policy may assist school districts to maintain legitimacy by meeting accountability targets and obtaining resources; however

unintended negative consequences may arise. The purpose of the study was to examine school districts' responses to educational policy regarding exit outcomes for students with disabilities.

Hypotheses

H.1.There will be a significant decrease in the proportion of students identified as SLD, ED, or OHI considered dropped out.

H.2. There will be a significant decrease in the proportion of Advanced Studies Diplomas and Standard Diplomas awarded and a significant increase in the proportion of alternative diploma options awarded for students identified as SLD, ED, or OHI.

H.3. There will not be a significant difference between the school district's size, poverty or reading and math proficiency, and the exit outcomes of students identified as SLD, ED, and OHI in 2009.

Research Questions

1. As accountability expectations have increased, have there been significant increases in the dropout rate, the proportion of alternative diplomas as well as the proportion of certificates of completion awarded and significant decreases in Standard and Advanced Studies Diplomas obtained in 2003, 2006 and 2009 for:
    a) Students identified as SLD?
    b) Students identified as ED?
    c) Students identified as OHI?
2. To what extent is the exit outcome (e.g., Advanced Studies Diploma, Standard Diploma, Modified Standard Diploma, Special Diploma, Certificate of Program

Completion, and GED and Drop-Out) obtained by students identified as SLD correlated with:

a) The school district's size in 2009?

b) The school district's poverty in 2009?

c) The school district's composite reading and math proficiency in 2009?

3. To what extent is the exit outcome obtained by students identified as ED correlated with:

a) The school district's size in 2009?

b) The school district's poverty in 2009?

c) The school district's composite reading and math proficiency in 2009?

4. To what extent is the exit outcome obtained by students identified as OHI correlated with:

a) The school district's size in 2009?

b) The school district's poverty in 2009?

c) The school district's composite reading and math proficiency in 2009?

Definition of Terms

The following terms represent the operationalized definitions that were used for the context of this study:

Advanced Studies Diploma - refers to a diploma available to students who earn at least 24 standard units of credit and at least nine verified units of credit (*Student Achievement and Graduation Requirements*, 2011).

Certificate of Program Completion - refers to a certificate available to students who complete prescribed programs of studies defined by a local school board but who do not qualify for diplomas (*Student Achievement and Graduation Requirements*, 2011).

Coercive Isomorphism - refers to the pressure for one organization to collude with another on whom it is dependent by force or persuasion (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

Drop-out - refers to an individual in grades 7-12 who was enrolled in school at some time during the previous school year and was not enrolled on October 1 of the current school year, or was not enrolled on October 1 of the previous school year although expected to be in the membership, has not graduated from high school or completed a state or district approved educational program and does not meet any of the exclusionary conditions: transfer to another public school district, private school or state or district approved education program, temporary school - recognized absence due to suspension, illness or death (*Part B State Performance Plan*, 2005).

Emotional Disability(ED) - refers to a condition exhibiting one or more of the following characteristics over a long period of time and to a marked degree that adversely affects a child's educational performance:

1. An inability to learn that cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory, or health factors;
2. An inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with peers and teachers;
3. Inappropriate types of behavior or feelings under normal circumstances;
4. A general pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression; or

5. A tendency to develop physical symptoms or fears associated with personal or school problems.

ED includes schizophrenia. The term does not apply to children who are socially maladjusted, unless it is determined that they have ED as defined in this section (34 CFR 300.8 (c)(10)).

Exiter-a student who has graduated from or dropped out of a comprehensive high school and is not currently enrolled in public education.

Exit Outcome- means leaving a comprehensive high school with a document such as the Advanced Studies Diploma, Standard Diploma, Modified Standard Diploma, Special Diploma, General Achievement Diploma, Certificate of Completion, General Education Development Certificate or leaving without a document such as students considered dropped out.

General Achievement Diploma (GAD) - an applicant must be at least 18 years of age or not enrolled in public school. Twenty standard units of credit are required along with a passing score on the GED examination (*Emergency Regulations*, 2003).

General Education Development Certificate (GED)- An applicant must be at least eighteen years of age and not currently enrolled in public education or otherwise meeting the school attendance requirements set forth in section 22.1-254 of the state code. Under special circumstances the age limit may be lowered to sixteen years for applicants 1) who have been instructed by their parents in their home pursuant to 22.1-254.1 and who have successfully completed such home school instruction; 2) who have been excused from school attendance pursuant to subsection B and C of 22.1-254; 3) for whom an Individual Student Alternative Education Plan (ISAEP) has been granted

pursuant to subsection D of 22.1-254; 4) who are housed in adult correctional facilities and who are actively pursuing a GED certificate but who have not been granted an ISAEP pursuant to subsection D of 22.1-254; 5) who have been expelled from school pursuant to 22.1-277.06 through 22.1-277.08; or 6) who are required by court order to participate in the GED testing program (§ 20-360-10 of the state code).

Legitimacy - refers to an organization that reflects cultural alignment, normative support, or consonance with relevant rules or laws (Scott, 1995).

Mimetic Isomorphism - refers to an organization that models itself on other organizations as a response to uncertainty (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

Modified Standard Diploma- refers to a diploma intended for certain students at the secondary level who have a disability and are unlikely to meet the credit requirements for a Standard Diploma. Eligibility and participation in the program is determined by the student's IEP team and the student, when appropriate. Decisions of eligibility and participation may be made at any point after the student's eighth grade year. Written consent from a parent/guardian must be obtained for a student to choose this diploma program (*Student Achievement and Graduation Requirements*, 2011).

Other Health Impairment (OHI)- refers to having limited strength, vitality or alertness, including a heightened alertness to environmental stimuli, that results in limited alertness with respect to the educational environment that is due to chronic or acute health problems such as asthma, attention deficit disorder or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, diabetes, epilepsy, a heart condition, hemophilia, lead poisoning, leukemia, nephritis, rheumatic fever, and sickle cell anemia and Tourette

syndrome that adversely affects a child's educational performance (34 CFR 300.8 (c)(10)).

Specific Learning Disability (SLD) - refers to a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, that may manifest itself in the imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell or to do mathematical calculations, including conditions such as perceptual disabilities, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia. SLD does not include learning problems that are primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor disabilities; of intellectual disabilities; of emotional disabilities; of environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage. (§ 22.1-213 of the state code; 34 CFR 300.8 (c)(10)).

Special Diploma - refers to a diploma available to students with disabilities who complete the requirements of their IEP and who do not meet the requirements for other diplomas (Student Achievement and Graduation Requirements, 2011).

Standard Diploma - refers to a diploma available to students who earn at least 22 standard units of credit by passing required courses and electives, and earn at least six verified credits by passing end-of-course state tests or other assessments approved by the Board of Education (Student Achievement and Graduation Requirements, 2011).

CHAPTER 2: Review of Literature

Educational governance in the United States uses a rational approach based upon a classical organizational model originally applied to business industries (Callahan, 1962; Fayol, 1949; Meyer, 1977; Skrtic, 1987, 2008; Taylor,1911). As organizational theory evolved, new schools of thought emerged which challenged rational decision making, and public education was the model used to describe organizations as operating more as institutional arrangements responding to pressures from their institutionalized environment (Cohen, March, & Olsen, 1972; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer, 1977; Weick, 1976). Institutional theorists argued that educational organizations should separate the educational organization's formal structure from actual practice (Meyer, 1977; Weick, 1976). In an era of accountability, however, constraints have been placed on the environment in which states and local educational agencies operate. This chapter will review one state's strategic responses to ensure legitimacy including high stakes testing and alternate diploma options for students with disabilities.

Classical Organization Theory Influences Educational Governance

The field of educational governance is grounded in concepts that grew out of scientific management and bureaucracy theories that presuppose an organization is rational and that organizational change is a rational-technical process (Callahan, 1962; Owens, 1987; Scott, 1981; Skrtic, 2008). In the early 19th century, classical organizational theory dominated organizational analysis with the work of Frederick Taylor, Henry Fayol, and Max Weber who pioneered theories concerning administration and management of organizations. Their views supported organizations as rational entities, which met targeted goals, with the greatest efficiency; therefore, the focus was not on the goal itself but its implementation.

Scientific management is a purely functionalist approach for organizing and managing industrial firms. Frederick Taylor, a major contributor to the scientific management school of thought, postulated that the country suffered from inefficiency, and the remedy was systematic management. Applying a bottom-up organizational approach, Taylor implemented time and motion studies in industrial plants to implement tasks with minimal input and maximal output of resources and energy (Taylor, 1911). Taylor intended to prove a true science of management applicable across all human activities including social activities, home management, business, churches, and government departments.

Educational reformers embracing scientific management principles questioned the efficiency of schools. Responding to pressure, superintendents began applying the principles to efficient management of resources, equipment, the school plant and instructional tasks carried out by classroom teachers such as lesson planning. Although scientific management principles were initially applied to schools and other school organizations during the social efficiency movement at the turn of the 20th century, these ideals have remained the grounding formulation of educational administration ever since (Callahan, 1962; Skrtic, 2008).

Rational organizational perspectives suggest that the characteristics of organizations shift over time, mainly to pursue better performance (Ashworth, Boyne, & Delbridge, 2008). Henry Fayol (1949) considered elements of management to include annual planning, organization, professional development, and commanding through periodic audits. Conducting audits from a rational perspective focused on the technical features of the organization. Technology in classical organizational theory refers to the type of work done within the organization to transform inputs into outputs. Inputs for schooling came from society such as students, values, goals, fiscal resources, and knowledge. Schools then

"processed" students according to school levels, class schedules, grade levels instruction, curricula, and exit individuals with improved intellectual and manual skills along with a sense of social responsibility (Owens, 1987).

Fayol (1949) differed from Taylor by centering his theory upon a top-down bureaucratic approach regarding the management of the industrial organization. Fayol's principles of human management included centralization, a clear division of work, authority including sanctions, discipline, unity of command, one clear direction, and subordination of individual interest.

The efficiency-based model in educational organizations mirrors an industrial model. Production is broken down into precise routines where outcomes can be determined before execution of steps. The process of turning inputs into outputs is achieved through standardization of work activities and processes with control coming from the formalization of job descriptions, rules and regulations (Callahan, 1962; Meyer, 1977; Skrtic, 1987; 2008). While Taylor and Fayol contributed to human management in firms, perhaps the most influential classical organization theory described the organization's structure.

Classical Organization Theory Influences Educational Structure

In the early 19th century, Max Weber concentrated attention on formal structures of organizations. Similar to Fayol, Weber approached organizations from a top down approach; however, he was more interested in the administrative decision-making process where power, authority and decisions flow down the hierarchy and filter through the firm. Using formal authority to control organizational processes Max Weber coined the concept of bureaucracy. The ideal bureaucratic organization contained organizational characteristics such as a hierarchical structure, fixed division of work, sets of rules determining behavior, employees

chosen because of expertise, separation of organization from personal rights, and career employment for participants. The level of position within the organization dictated the level of power and decision making of the individual (Barteck & Mullen, 1995; Scott, 1981). In Weber's opinion, these characteristics maximized rational decision making and administrative efficiency because experts with the most experience were the best qualified to make decisions and coordinate workers in pursuit of organizational goals (Blau & Scott, 1960).

In the nineteenth century, although states developed the basic framework for schooling like compulsory attendance laws, and teacher certification, control was weak in organizational terms. For example, in 1890 the median in American state departments consisted of a staff of two (Meyer, Scott, Strang, & Creighton, 1988). Between 1940 and 1980, the educational environment became more centralized. Small school districts consolidated into larger districts from an average of 2400 to 300 in each state. Urban school reformers integrated schools into a few districts, to manage schools in a more efficient manner mirroring industrial organizational models. Larger school districts created more job specialization moving from less than one third of schools employing principals in 1940, to more principals than schools in the United States by 1980. Also in the 1980s school districts were more likely to employ superintendents and assistant superintendents than in earlier decades (Meyer, Scott, Strang, & Creighton 1994).

Federal Governance Influences Educational Structure for Students with Disabilities

By the 1960s, with the presidencies of Kennedy and Johnson, the federal government became significantly involved in the management and funding of education (Meyer, Scott, & Strang, & Creighton, 1988; Spring, 2002). Initially the federal government provided fiscal incentives to influence organizational behaviors. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) provided financial resources primarily for culturally disadvantaged students with categorical aid to states for improvement of education for students with disabilities in state schools educating students with deafness and blindness (Duran, 2005).

The first federal law specifically addressing students with disabilities was P.L. 91-230 (1970) which expanded grant programs under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.. After the court cases of *PARC v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania* (1972) and *Mills v. Board of Education of the District of Columbia* (1972), the amended EHA required states that receive federal funds to adopt the organizational goal of providing full educational opportunity for students with disabilities.

In 1975, the federal government increased its role in special education with the passage of P.L. 94-142. This amendment to EHA came with a bill of rights and fiscal rewards for states choosing to accept grants to provide special education services. In order to receive monies, states had to enact state laws aligned with the federal law's principles (Katsiyannis, Yell, & Bradley, 2001). Throughout the 1970s, the federal government met its goal of integrating students with special needs into state education structures through the support of innovation and research activities. New structures were formed and supported by specialists at the state level with decision-making discretion permitted by categorical laws (Wirt & Kirst, 1997).

Prior to 1930, localities provided over 80% of funding toward education with states funding less than 20% and the federal share even smaller. By the 1980s, however, state funding rose to match or surpass levels of local funding. In addition, state authority expanded into domains of education such as curriculum, accreditation, minimum standards, personnel certification and meeting the needs of special populations (Meyer, Scott, & Strang, 1987).

The reform movement encompassed gradual growth in state policymaking in education. The increase in federal support increased capacity and formal structure of state educational agencies. By 1972, 75% of state educational agency staff had been employed for less than three years (Fuhrman & Elmore, 1990; Wirt & Kirst, 1997). Reforms relied on laws, regulations and monitoring technology to increase the state's oversight capabilities (Furhman & Elmore, 1990). Although states are constitutionally responsible for educating its citizens, accepting incentives such as categorical grants to assist with the provision of services for students with disabilities came with the cost of more federal involvement with state activities.

Many state policy objectives were codified as opposed to efforts to build local capacity thereby reinforcing an increasing state presence in local education activities. Others were offered to districts on a voluntary basis; however, there were so many strings attached that the demarcation between inducements and mandates became more obscured. For financially needy localities, inducements with monetary rewards seemed less like a choice than another regulation to follow (Furhman & Elmore, 1990).

Explanation of Compliance for Resource Dependency

From a resource dependency perspective, constraints on organizational actions influence organizational structure and behavior. State educational organizations face an

environment of competing and conflicting demands; however, resources are needed from that environment to survive. Survival is based on the extent to which organizations are effective at securing necessary resources (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). A number of conditions affect the extent to which an organization will comply with attempts of control:

- Awareness of the demands;
- Obtaining some resource from the entity making the demand;
- The resource is critical to the organization's operations;
- The agency making the demand controls the allocation and the organization cannot acquire the resources elsewhere;
- The focal organization does not control allocations critical to the agency's operation and survival;
- The actions and outcomes of the focal organization are visible and can be assessed to judge compliance;
- Satisfying the agency's requests are not in conflict with other components within the environment with which the focal organization is interdependent;
- The focal organization can develop outcomes that satisfy agency demands; and
- The organization desires to survive (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978).

While states have the constitutional responsibility for educating students with disabilities, programs and services are not solely funded with state resources. Although federal funds have never fully funded special education mandates, there is a reliance on federal monies to implement educational programs. As a result, states are more apt to comply with federal attempts of control. Fiscal resources from the federal government are

needed to supplement local funding of education programs. In addition, public reporting is required making the local educational agency's outcomes visible and subject to evaluation.

The fallacy of the rational approach to organizations is that too little attention was given to social, technological, and cultural contexts on organizational structure. While classical organization theory explains roles, rules and regulations, critics claim it pays too little attention to the behavior of organizational participants and the environmental context in which the organization operates. The theory implies that if goals are specific, implementation will simultaneously occur (Hoy & Miskel , 2001; Parsons, 1956; Powell & DiMaggio, 1991; Selznick, 1948; Scott, 1981).

Institutional Explanation of Organizational Behavior

General systems theory supported by biologist Ludwig von Bertalanffy in the 1950s served as the impetus for contemporary institutional explanations of organizational action (Scott, 2008; 1981; Scott & Meyer, 1994). The premise was every system could be characterized by collective parts with relationships among one another that were interdependent, parts of the system however differed in the level of complexity, stability, and dependence (Bertalanffy, 1968). The systems perspective of organizations asserted that environmental conditions constrained, formed, seeped within and renewed interdependent parts within the organization (Scott, 2008).

The survival of organizations depends upon relationships built within larger systems in which they operate. Early organizational analysts underestimated the importance of linkages between the organization and the environment. The structure, environment, goals, technology and participants are elements of an organization that can not be studied individually. Organizations are instead comprised of a system of elements that are interdependent on each

other (Scott, 1981). Institutional theorists view organizations as open systems where environmental conditions are closely linked to the characteristics of the systems within it. From a sociological perspective, organizations concurrently influence and exhibit interdependence upon the external environment.

DiMaggio and Powell (1983) expounded on the environmental perspective and coined the term "organizational field" to indicate an aggregate of organizations that make up a recognized area of institutional life: key suppliers, consumers, regulatory agencies and resource providers. The interorganizational structure of the U.S. education system fits this definition with the interdependence of the federal, state, and local level. Regulatory processes constrain organizational behaviors through activities such as rule setting, monitoring and providing rewards and sanctions. From this view, regulations and laws have the ability to establish processes and impose conformity in order to influence organizational behavior (Scott, 2008). Creating a typology currently used in sociology, the idea of an organizational field amplified the importance of connectedness and structural similarity. The process of structuration occurs with an increase in interaction among organizations in the field, the development of interorganizational structures of domination, an increase in the amount of information that organizations must attend to and a mutual awareness that the participants are involved in a common endeavor. Once an organization enters the field, powerful ties emerge that lead them to become more similar to each other. The term that captures the process of homogenization is isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

Isomorphism: Coercive, Mimetic and Normative

DiMaggio and Powell (1983) described three types of isomorphism: coercive, mimetic, and normative. Coercive isomorphism occurs when formal and informal pressures

are placed on organizations upon whom they are dependent and by societal expectations within which the organization functions. Pressures to change the organizations formal structure, culture, goals program or mission can be felt as force, persuasion, or invitations of collusion. Organizational change may be a direct response to government mandates. The existence of a shared legal environment affects the structure and behavior of organizations. Examples of ceremonial actions in reference to special education could include schools offering inclusion courses, employing special educators, developing administrators who can meet diverse needs and creating curriculum to meet state standards.

Institutional isomorphism is not only limited to coercive authority. Uncertainty also has a strong influence on imitation. This tends to occur when there is ambiguity with goals or the environment creates symbolic uncertainty. Modeling after another organization offers a solution to problematic issues. The organization copied may have no desire to be imitated but serves as a convenient source of practices. Modeling can also occur indirectly through employee transfer, turnover and consulting firms. Organizations can adopt "innovations" to enhance legitimacy and show that they are trying to improve conditions (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

The third type of isomorphism is defined as normative indicating organizational changes due to professionalization. Professions are influenced by coercive and imitative pressures within organizations but they demonstrate similarity to their counterparts in other organizations. Two aspects important to normative isomorphism are universities which offer formal education and legitimation of a specific knowledge base and professional trade associations which define rules about organizational and professional behavior (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

While DiMaggio and Powell (1983) described how organizations structure themselves to become similar; Meyer and Rowan (1977) emphasized why organizations structure themselves in a similar fashion. Organizations are motivated to incorporate the practices and procedures that are institutionalized in society to increase legitimacy. These practices functioning as "powerful myths" are adopted ceremonially by organizations. These rules formulate a taken-for-granted status supported by public opinion or law.

The issue is that complying with these institutional practices and procedures is often dissonant with indicators of efficiency. Coordination and controlling activities within the organization to promote efficiency undercuts ceremonial conformity and threatens support and legitimacy. As a result, institutional rules may have effects on the organizational structure and implementation of work activities that are very different from the social behavior and relationships adjoining the organization (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; 1983).

Loosely Coupled Education Organizational Forms

Institutional theorists describe educational organizations as structurally-slack models (Cohen, March and Olsen, 1972; Weick, 1976; Meyer, 1977). School districts and schools had autonomy and latitude and demonstrated gaps between formal structure and organizational practices (Owens, 1987). Capturing this concept with clear imagery, Weick (1976) wrote:

> Imagine that you're either the referee, coach, player, or spectator in an unconventional soccer match: the field for the game is round; there are several goals scattered haphazardly around the circular field; people can enter or leave the game whenever they want to; they can throw balls in whenever they want; they can say "that's my goal" whenever they want to, as many times as they want to, and for as

> many goals as they want to; the entire game takes placed on a sloped field; and the game is played as if it makes sense. If you now substitute principals for referees, teachers for coaches, students for players, parents for spectators, and schooling for soccer in those examples, you have an equally unconventional depiction of school organizations. The beauty of this depiction is that it captures a different set of realities within educational organizations that are caught when these same organizations are viewed through the tenets of bureaucratic theory (p. 1).

Weick (1976) labeled an organization as "loosely coupled" when gaps exist between the formal structure and actual work activities. He further asserted that the preoccupation with rational, efficient and coordinated structures "blinded" researchers to less rationalized or tightly related occurrences in organizations. Coupled events are responsive to each other but maintain a sense of separateness such as the guidance office and the principal's office. Both offices are attached to a school, but each retains separate identity and attachment may be less frequent. In organizations, the two most-coupled entities are the technical core of the organization and the authority office. The technical core has technology and is task-specific. The authority office includes positions, offices, rewards, sanctions, and opportunities the coupling presumed to bring the procedures and practices into alignment. In educational institutions, Weick asserted neither coupling elements were prominent. Organizations continue spending much time on planning and assessing action in terms of how they fit with the plan. If the level of responsiveness between the plan and actions is prone to loose coupling, then events will not happen as they were designed (Weick, 1976).

Meyer (1977) argued that educational organizations lacked internal coordination. Instruction was removed from the control of the organizational structure. There was no

universal content standard and relatively little sequential interdependence in teaching work. While in the abstract, students were to master the subject matter by a certain grade, in the "real world" that practice is often violated with limited cost to the organization. Lastly, educational organizations did not often measure their educational outputs or efficiency. Teaching work was not subjected to serious evaluation and yet, educational systems remained stable giving the impression of strong coordination. This was possible because educational work is coordinated in the social environment. Society has a general social understanding of:

- What a school is;
- What a teacher does;
- The types of teachers;
- The types of students being educated;
- How the student progresses from beginning to end; and
- What categories are appropriate subjects to be taught (Meyer, 1975)

The educational system works because everyone has a general understanding of the process. In essence, educational organizations function to manage the socially- agreed-upon rites of passage of education. On these issues, education organizations are tightly aligned with regard to matters of law and management for categories of teachers, students, and curriculum but the main business is to maintain categories, not instructional activity (Meyer, 1975). The key to understanding educational organizations was to see them as institutionalized organizations (Meyer & Rowan, 1977).

Meyer and Rowan (1983) studied 188 elementary schools in thirty-four school districts in San Francisco. Their findings indicated a loose coupling of instructional

coordination. Evaluation of instructional activity was not a direct responsibility of central office staff. Only one superintendent out of 34 interviewed reported that central office staff evaluated teachers. Even with instructional oversight delegated to building principals, 85% of the principals reported that they did not work with teachers on a daily basis and a majority of principals reported no daily interaction among teachers of other grade levels. Teaching activities were much segmented (Owens, 1987).

Cohen, March and Olsen (1972) examined decision-making practices at the university level. Similar to K-12 institutions, educational goals were not specific, frequently changed, varied for different groups and often conflicted with one another. In addition, the processes or technologies in place were not clearly understood and difficult to explain other than generically, participation was fluid with students, teachers, and administrators moving in and out. As a result, the organization managed to survive, but its own processes were not fully understood by its participants.

Loose coupling of educational systems remained unchallenged until the era of accountability. Applications to the study of education have been scattered, and many educators treat institutional theory as if the models in the late 1970s represent its final form. The landscape of education has changed bringing more centralized practices with a focus on educational productivity. In addition, public education faces pressure from market driven organizations which privatize education. States and local educational agencies are no longer protected from pressures of accountability (Meyer & Rowan, 2006).

Accountability Challenges Institutional Explanations

While classical views of organization management and administration for a long time remained unchallenged, it would be inaccurate to view the classical approach as having historical value with no impact on modern organizations like public agencies. Advocates of accountability reform operate from a classical perspective where mandating change leads to new organizational forms and better results (Ashworth, Boyne, Delbridge, 2007; Owens, 1987). Concerns regarding the nation are economic, social, and political which led to a more centralized management approach by the federal government. Furthering arguments in national reports like A Nation at Risk (1983), legislative reforms built upon a foundation that the nation's economy and the educational system were intricately interwoven (Mawhinney, 1995). The Goals 2000: Educate America Act of 1994 anchoring the development of challenging standards along with strategies to sustain reform such as improved graduation rates, assessment of competency in grades 4, 8, and 12, increased mathematics and science achievement, supported the development of highly-skilled teachers, and relationship building with parents (Duran, 2005; Goertz, 2005; Hanushek &Jorgenson 1996; O'Day 1995).

Federal influences in educational policy persisted with the Improving America' Schools Act (IASA) of 1994. This legislation for the first time coordinated elementary and secondary programs with local reform efforts so that all students regardless of socioeconomic status had an opportunity to learn the same standards established under The Goals 2000: Educate America Act (1994). States were more accountable for the performance of students and states had to comply with general requirements of IASA to maintain federal support (Hanushek & Jorgenson 1996; Goertz, 2005).

The Mid-Atlantic State Accountability Processes

In the 1970s, citizens in the mid-Atlantic state under study approved a change to the state's constitution allowing the General Assembly to adopt a quality standard for public schools for areas such as instructional programs, class size, and diplomas. By 1978, the standards were changed to include minimum skills objectives in reading and math and the requirement of completed units of course credit. In the early 1980s, objectives were created to help students acquire knowledge and skills necessary for postsecondary education and employment (Department of Education, 2003).

In the 1990s, a major four-part reform initiative began. The first part included adoption of state standards. Standards for core areas of mathematics, science, English, history and social science were developed in 1995, setting the expectation of what teachers needed to teach and the skills students needed to acquire. The requirement increased accountability for the local educational agencies; however, the state maintained that the standards preserved local autonomy and flexibility (Department of Education, 1995).

A year later, the second part of the initiative occurred as the state introduced an assessment system linking graduation to the fulfillment of credit requirements and passing scores on state assessments for students graduating with an advanced studies or standard diploma. The assessment requirements also applied for students with disabilities and the failure to meet testing requirements restricted graduation options to a Certificate of Program Completion, Special Diploma or IEP Diploma, GED, or no exit document at all (*Implementation of a State Assessment as a Requirement for the Standard and Advanced Diplomas,* 1996).

The amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 1997) required students with disabilities to participate in the state's accountability system. Seeking social legitimacy through alignment with laws, the mid-Atlantic state developed guidelines addressing qualifications necessary for students with disabilities to participate in state assessments. Enrollment in a course with a verified credit required student participation; however, the IEP team could otherwise determine to exempt a student from one or more of the assessments (*Participation of Students with Disabilities*, 2000).

The third prong of the mid-Atlantic state's initiative involved revising accreditation standards sanctioned through the quality standards adopted by the state constitution in the 1970s. Although the state purported that local educational agencies had the authority to prescribe additional requirements for graduation, they could not implement them without approval of the mid-Atlantic state Board of Education. In addition, the Board shared concerns regarding local additions to graduation requirements because failure to achieve the standard diploma requirements would leave students without an exit document; therefore, more flexibility existed for local educational agencies wanting to increase requirements for the Advanced Studies Diploma (*Transmitting the State Board of Education Guidance Document*, 1998).

The fourth prong of the initiative was a report card for school divisions. Each school in the mid-Atlantic state receives an accreditation rating based upon student achievement on state assessments in the areas of English, history/social science, mathematics, and science. Four ratings can be awarded: fully accredited, accredited with warning, accreditation denied and conditionally accredited. A fully accredited school means all students received passing rates. If students have difficulty passing the state assessments, the schools face the social

sanction of being accredited with warning. Moreover, the state views poor performance as a failure that needs to be corrected. School districts are required to receive state assistance identifying factors contributing to strengths and weaknesses such as instructional and intervention strategies, staff training, use of instructional time, curriculum alignment, and data analysis (*Accreditation Issues*, 2001).

Schools who fail to meet requirements for four consecutive years have accreditation denied. At this point, parents must receive notice in writing of the accreditation rating and a copy of the corrective action plan with the opportunity to provide feedback on the plan before final adoption. If a school district exists where one third of its schools have accreditation denied, the superintendent must be evaluated by the local school board.

Schools receive a conditional accreditation when newly built, or the school fails to meet requirements for four consecutive years and receives permission from the mid-Atlantic state's Board of Education to reconstitute instead of entering a memorandum of understanding. This allows the school to revert to an accreditation denied status (*Accountability*, 2010). The reform initiatives undertaken by the state put formal structures in place to guide instructional processes. This action assisted the state in responding to the federal requirements of ESEA (2001).

Alignment with Federal Requirements

The mid-Atlantic state established standards that increased graduation requirements and created an accreditation system based upon overall student achievement. ESEA (2001) however added an additional layer of accountability with the Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) rating indicating progress toward the federal initiative of reaching annual achievement benchmarks in reading and math with 100% proficiency by 2014. AYP focuses on

disaggregated student subgroups. In addition to schools receiving AYP ratings, states are also rated. Every year school divisions and schools must pass previously-set targets. In addition to reading and math, school divisions and the State must meet annual goals for attendance, science, writing, history/social science. There is also a federal graduation indicator that high schools and school districts must meet regarding the number of students who graduate with an Advanced Studies or Standard Diploma (Accountability, 2010).

Students with disabilities were one of the subgroups accounted for by ESEA (2001) but mandated accountability compliance continued with the reauthorization of IDEA. Within a year of the reauthorization of IDEA (2004) being enacted, the federal government diffused additional accountability measures to the state level for students with disabilities. The mid-Atlantic state was required to complete a State Performance Plan (SPP) establishing measureable and rigorous targets incorporating stakeholder input. The intent of the SPP was to ensure that federal monies were being spent efficiently on education and to impose accountability measures through self-assessment and a continuous monitoring tool focused on improved performance (Brauen, Luster & Wexler, 2005).

State agencies are required to submit the SPP to the Secretary of Education's office which has 120 days to complete the approval process. Critical components for plan approval include stakeholder involvement, targets that reflect improvement, quantifiable baseline data, and activities reasonably designed to help the State reach its goals. In addition, the targets have to be supported by an action plan which includes strategies detailing how the target will be met. Furthermore, States were required to complete annual and biennial reports on the SPP targets (Brauen, Luster & Wexler, 2005).

The mid-Atlantic state under study developed its SPP with stakeholders such as representatives of the State Special Education Advisory Committee, parents, school district superintendents, school district directors of special education, advocacy groups and other state agencies. The SPP consists of a total of 20 indicators; however, only 14 of those indicators relate to local educational agencies as a blueprint for state improvement. The first indicator of the SPP requires that all states report the "percent of youth with IEPs graduating with a regular diploma compared to the percent of all youth in the State graduating with a regular diploma" (20 U.S.C. 1416 (a) (3) (A)). For federal reporting purposes, two diploma options for students with disabilities provided by the State under study cannot be counted in the graduation rate because they do not meet the federal definition of a "regular diploma."

Alternate Diploma Options Allow Increased Flexibility

In the late 1990s, there were only three diploma options recognized in the mid-Atlantic state: Advanced Studies Diploma, Standard Diploma, and Special Diploma (*Approval of Courses to Satisfy Graduation Requirements*, 1998). Beginning in ninth grade, students need to earn standard and verified units of credits for various types of diplomas. Standard credit indicates completion of 140 clock hours of instruction and the requirements of the course. The verified credit is awarded when the student earns the standard unit of credit and achieves a passing score on the end-of-course assessment which can be a standard of learning test or an additional test approved by the Board of Education. (*State Standards*, 2007).

The two exit documents that require the most standard and verified credits are the Advanced Studies and Standard Diplomas. A Standard Diploma requires students to earn 22 standard units of credit and six verified credits in the areas of English, mathematics,

laboratory science, history and social sciences, health and physical education, fine arts or career and technical education, and electives. The Advanced Studies Diploma requires two additional standard units of credit and three additional verified credits. Instead of six credits in electives, only two credits are mandatory with more standard and verified credits required in the areas of mathematics, laboratory science, history and social sciences, and foreign language (*Regulations*, 2006). The reform initiative created in the mid-1990s increased graduation criteria and linkages to state assessments, and built a system with limited options for those who did not meet the credit requirements for an Advanced Studies and Standard Diploma.

In 2003, the mid-Atlantic state's Board of Education approved the General Achievement Diploma (GAD). The intent of this document was to provide a diploma option for students who dropped out of school or school leavers who did not obtain an exit document. The GAD is for students 18 years or older who are not enrolled in the public schools. The requirements included a standard unit of credit and a passing score on the GED examination. Flexibility exists regarding where credits can be acquired such as the public school, community college, adult learning center, distance learning, correspondence courses, or online. It appears the GAD is not being implemented for 18 year old students as there were no reports of districts issuing this diploma to students 18 years of age in the 2003, 2006, or 2009 academic year.

In 2007, the mid Atlantic state's General Assembly revised its quality standards and directed the state Board of Education to institute requirements for a Technical Diploma that must meet or exceed the requirements of a Standard Diploma with a concentration in career and technical education. In addition, legislation also created an Advanced Technical Diploma

for those students who meet the requirements of the Advanced Studies Diploma and also concentrated in career and technical education.

An increased accountability system including standards, assessments, and additional graduation requirement creates a high-stakes testing environment. Proponents of high-stakes testing assert that tougher standards promote a higher expectation which ultimately improves the status of the high school diploma. Students with disabilities also benefit from being held to the same standards as other students. Inclusion of students with disabilities in high-stakes assessments also advances the least restrictive environment principle of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004. If students with disabilities are expected to perform like their non-disabled peers, they need access to the general education curriculum (Erickson, 2006, Johnson & Thurlow, 2003).

Diploma Strategy Specifically for Students with Disabilities

According to Thurlow (2005), high-stakes testing was closely aligned with high school policies that allowed students to exit high school with an alternative to a standard diploma. In 2000, the Mid-Atlantic State's Board provided an option of a Modified Standard Diploma for certain students with disabilities who were not likely to meet the credit requirements for a Standard Diploma. Participation in this diploma option was to be determined by the student's Individual Education Program (IEP) team after completing the eighth grade year. A course of study was approved with the encouragement that students could move from the Modified Standard Diploma to a Standard of Advanced Studies Diploma. The intent was that teachers would be provided more flexibility in creating curricula and individualized instruction. For example, students had the option to take two-

year courses and earn the one credit needed to satisfy the criteria in a content area (*Courses to Satisfy the Graduation Requirements*, 2000).

A Modified Standard Diploma requires two less standard units of credit than a Standard diploma and the student does not have to pass end-of-course assessments to earn verified credits. There are, however, literacy and numeracy competency assessments that must be passed. Three years after inception, new guidelines allowed students to take expedited retests and substitute higher-level State assessments to meet the eighth grade literacy and numeracy standard (*Literacy and Numeracy Assessments*, 2003). However, in 2004, the Board of Education approved a proposal to reduce the cut scores necessary to meet the literacy requirements for the Modified Standard Diploma. Additionally, the adjusted cut score could be applied retroactively to all students who now met the criteria for passing (*Adjusted Cut Scores for the Modified Standard Diploma*, 2004).

Initially, the Modified Standard Diploma was designed to be offered to both students with and without disabilities, but the Board of Education rejected the policy believing it would create a "second class diploma" thus lowering the State standards (Portner, 2001). According to deFur (2002), if this option is acceptable for students with disabilities and not for those without, the possibility existed for very little enhancement of post-school outcomes and opportunities for students with disabilities.

Using a classical bureaucratic approach, the federal and state governments attempted to mandate formal changes to organizational structure to increase outcomes for students with disabilities. Prior to 2001, state agencies had more control over their internal processes. By 2005, NCLB and IDEA placed new accountability requirements on state and local educational agencies. Local educational agencies are tasked to ensure all students progress in

the general education curriculum and demonstrate higher proficiency each year. In addition, student slippage places the accreditation of the school and possibly the district at risk of facing state sanctions. Furthermore, school districts must respond to their stakeholders regarding an annual report card produced for the public (Department of Education, 2008).

When facing pressures, some school districts instituted practices giving the impression of improprieties with State assessments and accountability requirements. In 2001, the State addressed practices of manipulating schedules so that students dropped courses right before the State assessment was to be administered. Additionally, school districts were reminded that policies systematically excluding students were prohibited (*Accreditation Issues*, 2001).

Over the years, other incidents have been investigated in the State regarding testing irregularities with possible impact on school district and state accreditation ratings. In 2008, the department proposed a protocol to the Board of Education describing processes to investigate, report, and administer punitive actions for violating test security procedures including monetary fines, suspension or revocation of state issued licenses. The state department also has the authority to withhold or deny accreditation ratings (Department of Education, 2008). Table 2.1 describes the political context of the state from 2002 through 2008.

Table 2.1: The Mid-Atlantic State's Political Context Timeline from 2002-2008

Month/Year	State Action
March 2002	The State Board of Education appoints a committee to review the No Child Left Behind Act (2001) to determine the impact on board regulations (*P.L. 107-110 No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*, 2002)
May 2002	The mid-Atlantic state surveys local special education directors to prepare a status report for the State Board of Education and requests information on the pass rate for math and reading for students pursuing the Modified Standard Diploma
September 2002	• Publishes guidelines for students with disabilities to participate in the State accountability system. • IEP team determines how students will participate. • Determines that students with disabilities in 3rd, 5th, or 8th grade must first be considered for participation in the State assessment system unless they have not received instruction in the content measured by the assessment. • Determines if the student does not participate in the State assessment in the respective grade level, then they are required to be assessed through an alternate assessment program. • Determines that students with disabilities must take applicable state assessments if enrolled in the course with the intention of earning a standard unit of credit. Students who are auditing the course or being instructed in only part of the content are not required to take the state assessment end-of-course test.
October 2002	• Defines purpose of the alternate assessment as enabling students with unique physical and mental disabilities who cannot participate in the state assessment an opportunity to earn verified credits toward a Standard and Advanced Diploma or to meet the reading and writing requirements of the Modified Standard Diploma. • Establishes a review panel for each course with an end-of-course test that determined if a verified credit will be awarded. Results are included in the pass rate for schools
February 2003	Guidelines are developed for schools accredited with warning requiring a three-year action plan to be submitted to the State's Department of Accountability. (*School Improvement Planning Processes for Schools Rated Accredited with Warning*, 2003)
March 2003	School districts are reminded that school boards have had the opportunity to develop an Individual Student Alternative Education Plan (ISAEP) program to allow the fulfillment of compulsory attendance requirements by any student who is at least 16 years of age who is at risk of dropping

	out of school, is not earning the required number of credits for graduation, meets academic entrance requirements, and chooses to prepare for the General Educational Development (GED) Tests. (*Individual Student Alternative Education Plan (ISAEP) Program Guidelines, Revised*, 2003)
May 2003	• The state clarifies that the Standard, Advanced Studies and Modified Standard diplomas are available for students with disabilities • The State's standards require local school boards to award a Special Diploma to students with disabilities who complete the requirements of their Individualized Education Programs (IEP) if they do not meet the requirements for other diplomas. • Students who do not qualify for diplomas but complete a prescribed program of studies defined by the local school board shall be awarded a Certificate of Program Completion. (*Clarification of Diplomas for Students with Disabilities*, 2003)
August 2003	The General Achievement Diploma is approved (*Requirements for the General Achievement Diploma*, 2003)
September 2003	The Regulations for Establishing Standards for Accrediting Public Schools (2000) set forth action requirements for schools that are rated accredited with warning. The Department of Education developed a school academic review process and monitoring plan designed to assist schools rated as Accredited with Warning. (*Academic Reviews for Schools Rated Accredited with Warning in a Specific Academic Area or Areas*, 2003)
September 2003	NCLB allows states the flexibility to establish alternate means of establishing adequate yearly progress for small n schools. The State defined Small n Schools as schools having fewer than 50 students enrolled in grades or courses for which there are statewide assessments. (*Small n Schools Under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001: Submission of Body of Evidence for Adequate Yearly Progress Determinations*, 2003)
November 2003	The State offers different options to earn verified credits for a Standard Diploma • Pass any four state assessment tests from among the 10 tests in mathematics, science, or history/social science • Pass any substitute test in mathematics, science, or history/social science from among those included on the Board of Education's approved list • Earn industry certification(s) from among those listed on the Board

	of Education's approved list • Earn up to four locally awarded verified credits in science or history in accordance with Board of Education guidelines and local school board policy and procedures. • Pass any elective course in which the core academic State assessment course content has been integrated, and pass the related end-of-course test • Demonstrate mastery of course content and objectives in any course and pass the relevant test upon the recommendation of the division superintendent to earn a verified credit without having to meet the 140-clock-hour instructional requirement. (*Options for Earning Verified Credit for Graduation*, 2003)
April 2004	The State Board of Education adopted adjusted cut scores to 299 on the grade 8 reading and 360 for the mathematics tests for special education students taking these tests to meet the literacy and numeracy requirements of the modified standard diploma. (*Adjusted Cut Scores for the Modified Standard Diploma*, 2004)
May 2004	The State Board of Education approves cut scores for substitute tests determining literacy and numeracy requirements for the Modified Standard Diploma. (*Cut Scores for Substitute Tests for the Modified Standard Diploma*, 2004)
November 2004	Since NCLB allowed for the creation of "one or more" alternate assessments, the state introduced a grade- level alternative assessment for students with disabilities. (*The State Grade Level Alternative Assessment*, 2004)
January 2005	The state informs local educational agencies that the IDEA was reauthorized with many new requirements becomes effective 7/1/2005. (*Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004*, 2005)
June 2005	The state considers developing different reading and math assessments for students with disabilities pursuing the Modified Standard Diploma and creates a committee to examine the issue. (*Committee to Advise the Department of Education on the Appropriate Content for Numeracy and Literacy Assessments for Students with Disabilities Pursuing the Modified Standard Diploma*, 2005)
August 2005	The state develops an appeal process for schools that do not agree with the AYP determination. (*Appeals of AYP Accountability Decisions for Schools and School Divisions Under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*, 2005)
January 2006	In order to meet NCLB requirements, the state develops a statewide system for providing assistance to school districts receiving Title I funding. There are six strands the districts have to choose from: 1) standards and instructional resources; 2) assessments and data-driven decision making; 3) instructional support, interventions, and acceleration;

	4) teacher quality and leadership development; 5) partnerships and support networks; and 6) accountability for results and informed parents. (*Requirements under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 for a Statewide System of Support,* 2006)
April 2006	• The state adopted cut scores on the new grade 8 reading and mathematics grade level tests for the literacy and numeracy requirements of the Modified Standard Diploma: • Test Passing Scale Score: Literacy Requirement 371; Numeracy Requirement 344 (*Modified Standard Diploma Grade Level Standards of Learning Test,* 2006)
May 2006	The state introduced an auditing system of state assessments to ensure that students are tested as prescribed by state and federal guidelines. (*State Assessment Audit System*, 2006)
August 2006	Students with disabilities who participated in the state grade-level alternative assessment during their eighth-grade year and who are working toward a Modified Standard Diploma may use their scores to fulfill the literacy and numeracy requirements of this diploma. (*State Grade Level Alternative Scores and Modified Standard Diplomas*, 2006)
August, 2006	The state adopted cut scores for the state's alternate assessment program for grades 3 through 5, grades 6 through 8, and grades 9 through 12 in the content areas of reading, mathematics, science, and history/social science. (*State Alternate Assessment Program New Passing Scores Established by the Board of Education,*2006)
September 2006	• The state revises its accreditation standards and reintroduces language stricken from the first version related to exit outcome for students pursing the Modified Standard Diploma. • The student who has chosen to pursue a Modified Standard Diploma can pursue a Standard or Advanced Studies Diploma at any time in the students high school career, and • The student must not be excluded from courses or tests required for a Standard or Advanced Studies Diploma. (*Revised Standards of Accreditation*, 2006)
June 2007	The state introduces its plan for public reporting on the state's website of data regarding students with disabilities such as graduation rate, dropout rate and other indicators to meet the requirements set forth in IDEA (2004) (*Special Education State Performance Plan Reporting Data to the Public*, 2007)
August 2007	The state began focused monitoring based upon school district outcomes transitioning to a targeted assistance model. This model involved facilitated discussion on the school divisions performance against the state SPP indicators; a review of records, interviews, and observations for the purposes of determining compliance with regulations; verification of reliable and accurate data reporting; and facilitation on the development of

	action plans. School divisions will be required to develop an action plan when state targets are not met. (*Special Education General Supervision and Monitoring Activities*, 2007)
January 2008	• The state shared the policy determination of the testing service which administers the GED as a response to media attention regarding the age of GED test takers. The testing service stated that the GED credential should not be a first-choice option and high school age students should be encouraged to pursue and complete the traditional high school diploma whenever possible. • The GED credential should, however, continue to be a second-chance option for adults who have dropped out of high school and for high school age students 16 years and older, after all attempts to obtain a high school diploma have been exhausted. (*Minimum Age for Taking the GED Test*, 2008)
May 2008	The state develops a procedure for investigating districts with irregularities in testing. (*Protocol for the State-Directed Investigations of Testing Irregularities, 2008*)

Unintended Consequences of Accountability Policy

The mid-Atlantic state's Annual Performance Report (2008) indicated 47% of students with disabilities received an Advanced Studies or Standard Diplomas. This means 53% of students with disabilities graduating with alternate diploma options rather than an Advanced Studies or Standard Diploma.

Public education faces environmental instability due to sustained concerns regarding educational outcomes, and the value of a standard high school diploma. As a result, states have implemented policies related to graduation offering modified courses of study and alternate diploma types. The advantages associated with earning a standard diploma and continuing education beyond high school includes increased possibilities of earnings, job benefits, career advancement and marketability. Postsecondary education also enhances community adjustment, opportunities for social network building and an increased quality of life (Wehman & Yasuda, 2005). In addition, students with disabilities who participate in

postsecondary education have greater chances for competitive employment than those who do not participate (Wehman & Yasuda, 2005; Sitlington, 2003).

Summary

The field of educational governance is grounded in concepts that grew out of scientific management and bureaucracy theory which presupposes organizations are rational, and organizational change is a rational-technical process (Callahan, 1962; Owens, 1987; Scott, 1981; Skrtic, 2008). Institutional theory claims organizations are instead comprised of a system of elements that are interdependent on each other (Scott, 1981). Institutional theorists view organizations as open systems where environmental conditions are closely linked to the characteristics of the systems within it. From a sociological perspective, organizations concurrently influence and exhibit interdependence upon the external environment.

The U.S. education system fits this definition with the interdependence of the federal, state, and local levels. Regulatory processes constrain organizational behaviors through activities like rule setting, monitoring, and providing rewards and sanctions. From this view, regulations and laws have the ability to establish processes and impose conformity in order to influence organizational behavior (Scott, 2008).

Powerful ties emerge that lead educational organizations to become similar to each other. Institutional isomorphism is not only limited to coercive authority. Uncertainty also has a strong influence on imitation. This tends to occur when there is ambiguity with goals, or the environment creates symbolic uncertainty.

Institutional theorists describe educational organizations as structurally slack models (Cohen, March &Olsen, 1972; Weick, 1976; Meyer, 1977). School districts and schools have

autonomy and latitude but demonstrate gaps between formal structure and organizational practices (Owens, 1987). Loose coupling of educational systems remained unchallenged since the 1970s. Applications to the study of education has been scattered and many educators treat institutional theory as if the models in the late 1970s represent its final form. The landscape of education has changed bringing forth more centralized practices with a focus on educational productivity.

A classical organizational perspective would argue that, operating from an industrial model, accountability mandates and creates formal structures with the expectation that increased outcomes will automatically occur. Through coercive means, the state government created guidelines, rules, and monitoring systems to ensure that districts develop structures to support increased outcomes for students with disabilities. This is accomplished by linking demands to fiscal resources which school districts need creating resource dependence. Regulations such as NCLB and IDEA have changed the political environment and added constraints to change organizational behavior. This study hypothesizes that the districts in the state will separate their practices from formal structure maintaining legitimacy by awarding more alternate diplomas to students identified as SLD, ED, and OHI regardless of size, poverty level, or academic proficiency.

CHAPTER 3: Methodology

This study tested the institutional theory explanation of organizational behavior when accountability measures regarding graduation are imposed on school districts. According to institutional theory, legitimacy drives the strategic response of school districts. The desire to appear socially acceptable and credible overrides concern over organizational efficiency (Scott, 1995). This study also assumed social reality is objective, consistent across settings and time, and analyzed into variables; therefore, a quantitative perspective was employed. The purpose of this study was to develop confidence that the level of knowledge regarding the institutional explanation of the related observed events is accurate or not by collecting evidence in the form of objective observations of relevant phenomena (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2003).

This study focused on students identified as SLD, ED and OHI exiting public high school with an Advanced Studies Diploma, Standard Diploma, Modified Standard Diploma, Special Diploma, Certificate of Program Completion, and GED in 2003, 2006, and 2009. Descriptive and inferential methods were employed to answer the research questions. Descriptive methods attempted to explain the current status of phenomena to determine events that occur at a single point in time. Inferential methods sought to clarify understanding of important phenomena through the strength of correlation between categorical variables (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2000). Categorical variables examined included district size, district poverty level, district academic proficiency, and exit outcomes of students identified as SLD, ED, and OHI. In addition, descriptive methods examined the proportion of exit outcomes students with disabilities received from school districts in 2003, 2006 and 2009.

Hypotheses

H.1.There will be a significant decrease in the proportion of students identified as SLD, ED, or OHI considered dropped out.

H.2. There will be a significant decrease in the proportion of Advanced Studies Diplomas and Standard Diplomas awarded and a significant increase in the proportion of alternative diploma options awarded for students identified as SLD, ED, or OHI.

H.3. There will not be a significant difference between the school district's size, poverty or reading and math proficiency, and the exit outcomes of students identified as SLD, ED, and OHI in 2009.

Research Questions

1. As accountability expectations have increased, have there been significant increases in the dropout rate, the proportion of alternative diplomas as well as the proportion of certificates of completion awarded and significant decreases in Standard and Advanced Studies Diplomas obtained in 2003, 2006 and 2009 for:
    a) Students identified as SLD?
    b) Students identified as ED?
    c) Students identified as OHI?
2. To what extent is the exit outcome (e.g., Advanced Studies Diploma, Standard Diploma, Modified Standard Diploma, Special Diploma, Certificate of Program Completion, and GED and Drop-Out) obtained by students identified as SLD correlated with:

a) The school district's size in 2009?

b) The school district's poverty in 2009?

c) The school district's composite reading and math proficiency in 2009?

3. To what extent is the exit outcome obtained by students identified as ED correlated with:

a) The school district's size in 2009?

b) The school district's poverty in 2009?

c) The school district's composite reading and math proficiency in 2009?

4. To what extent is the exit outcome obtained by students identified as OHI correlated with:

a) The school district's size in 2009?

b) The school district's poverty in 2009?

c) The school district's composite reading and math proficiency in 2009?

Research Design

Setting

A mid-Atlantic state in the top 20 most populated states in the country was the setting of the study. In 2008, its population surpassed 7.77 million people. There were 11 metropolitan areas in the state in which 86% of residents reside. The U.S. Census Bureau (2008) reported that the mid-Atlantic state was ranked as one of the top 15 states in the nation for adults aged 25-64 with an advanced degree or bachelor's degree and percentage of adults with a two-year degree. Conversely, the state was ranked in the mid-20s in the country for the percentage of adults without a high school diploma or equivalent. The state is divided into 132 school districts with 1,881 schools serving over 1.2 million students. Approximately

14% of the population consists of students with disabilities (State Report Card, 2008). Disability classifications for the state are listed in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1

Students by Disability Classification as of December 1, 2008

Classification	Population	Proportion by Disability
Intellectual Disability	9,866	6
Severe Disability	796	>1
Hearing Impairment	1,489	1
Speech Impairment	29,771	18
Visually Impaired	612	>1
Emotional Disability	10,125	6
Orthopedically Impaired	912	1
Other Health Impairment	27,881	17
Specific Learning Disability	57, 566	35
Deaf-Blind	20	>1
Multiple Disabilities	3,139	1
Autism	10,092	6
Traumatic Brain Injury	402	>1
Developmentally Delayed	13,226	8

Sample

The sample included 132 school districts which represented the entire state. All school districts were under the governance of the ESEA and subsequent state requirements. The

sampling frame was developed using a report generated by the Division of Educational Information Management Services at the state educational agency. This report lists the 132 school districts and exit outcomes for students with disabilities. Each school district reports to the state educational agency so the completion rate is 100 percent. Table 3.2 describes the location of districts, size, and socio-economic status.

Table 3.2

Description of Districts

Descriptors of regions, student population and socio-economic status	Total Districts in the State
Central	63
Eastern	32
Northern	35
Southwest	19
Less than 2,000 students	32
Between 2,001-4,000 students	35
Between 4,001 and 6,000 students	35
Between 6,001 and 10,000 students	14
Between 10,001 and 20,000 students	11
Between 20,001 and 30,000 students	4
Greater than 30,000 students	7
0 to 30% of students receiving free and reduced lunch	31
31% to 59% of students receiving free and reduced lunch	81
60% or more receiving free and reduced lunch	19

Instrumentation

Extant data sets used for state reporting purposes were analyzed in this study. Reports generated by the Division of Educational Information Management Services at the state educational agency indicated 132 school districts and exit outcomes for the disability classifications of SLD, ED, and OHI for years 2003, 2006 and 2009. Additional data sets include the SY 2008-2009 National School Lunch Program (NSLP) Free and Reduced Price Eligibility Report and the Fall Membership Reports for 2009.

Data Collection

Data were collected from a variety of sources. Two reports were made available through information requests to the Division of Educational Information Management Services of the state educational agency. One report included a listing of school districts, and exit outcomes for all disability classifications in 2008-2009. The other report included a listing of school districts and exit outcomes for students identified as SLD, ED, and OHI in 2003, 2006 and 2009.

The SY 2008-2009 National School Lunch Program (NSLP) Free and Reduced Price Eligibility Report, available on the state website, listed the frequency count and percentage of students receiving free and reduced school lunches. The percentage of students receiving free and reduced lunches was used to represent the school districts' poverty level.

The SY 2008-2009 Fall Membership Report, available on the state website, was organized into several categories. The District Totals by Grade report listed each school district along with the total number of full-time students. The district's full-time student

enrollment was used to represent the district size. Each report was provided in an Excel file format with a spreadsheet created for each variable described in the research questions.

Data Analysis

The unit of analysis for this study was the school district. Raw numbers for each school district were converted into proportions for descriptors such as Advanced Standard Diploma, Standard Diploma, Modified Standard Diploma, Special Diploma, Certificate of Completion, GED, Drop-out, enrollment, and poverty for students classified with SLD, ED and OHI which facilitated comparisons across school districts of differing sizes. In order to calculate student achievement for each school district in the sample, two state reports were generated for SY 2008-2009. The first report indicated the Grade 8 English Reading pass rate for all students. The second report listed the Grade 8 Mathematics pass rate for all students. An overall achievement composite score was created by summing the pass rates for math and English Reading for each school district. Each analysis will be described according to the assigned research question.

Research Question 1.

The raw numbers for diploma outcomes were converted to ratios and imported into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) to determine the relationships between variables. An Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) between groups was the original research design; however, the extant data set had many missing values due to the masking of outcomes in any cell less than 10. As a result, the outcomes were described using descriptive methods.

Research Question 2.

The raw numbers for diploma outcomes were converted to ratios and imported into the (SPSS). The relationships between school district academic proficiency, size, and poverty and exit outcome for students identified as SLD were examined using correlation analysis.

Research Question 3.

The raw numbers for diploma outcomes were converted to ratios and imported into the (SPSS). The relationship between school district academic proficiency, size, and poverty and exit outcome for students identified as ED were examined using correlation analysis.

Research Question 4.

The raw numbers for diploma outcomes were converted to ratios and imported into the (SPSS). The relationship between school district academic proficiency, size, and poverty and exit outcome for students identified as OHI were examined using correlation analysis.

Table 3.3

Data Sources and Analysis of Research Questions

Research Questions	Data Sources	Data Analysis
1. As accountability expectations have increased have there been significant increases in the dropout rate, the proportion of alternative diplomas as well as the proportion of certificates of completion awarded and significant decreases in Advanced Studies Diplomas and Standard diplomas obtained between 2003 and 2009 for: a) students identified as SLD b) students identified as ED c) students identified as OHI	SEA Information Request	Descriptive statistics

2. To what extent is the exit outcome (e.g., Advanced Studies Diploma, Standard Diploma, Modified Standard Diploma, Special Diploma, Certificate of Program Completion, and GED) obtained by students identified as SLD correlated with: a) The school district's size in 2009? b) The school district's poverty in 2009? c) The school district's composite reading and math proficiency in 2009?	A. SEA Information Request B. SEA AYP Status Report	Correlational Statistics
3. To what extent is the exit outcome obtained by students identified as ED correlated with: a) the school district's size in 2009 b) The school district's poverty in 2009? c) The school district's composite reading and math proficiency in 2009??	A. SEA Information Request B. SEA AYP Status Report	Correlational Statistics
4. To what extent is the exit outcome obtained by students identified as OHI correlated with: a) The school district's size in 2009? b) The school district's poverty in 2009? c) The school district's composite reading and math proficiency in 2009?	A. SEA Information Request B. SEA AYP Status Report	Correlational Statistics

Limitations and Delimitations

There are several limitations of this study beyond the researcher's control. Graduation requirements and diploma types analyzed in this study are unique to this state and may not generalize to other states. In addition, the state's calculation of graduation rates has changed

over the years making it difficult to study graduation rates longitudinally. Although data obtained by the state educational agency are collected electronically, data are still based upon school districts' self- reporting so there is a possibility that errors exist in the data set. In order to conceal personally identifiable information, the state masked any variable with a population of nine or less in one of the data sets, making it difficult to compare data due to many missing values. There is the possibility that smaller districts are underrepresented. In addition, it is possible that the proportion of exit outcomes in 2003 may be inflated because the state education agency did not provide dropout data for 2003 for students identified as SLD, ED, and OHI.

There are several delimitations of this study. First, the study was bounded to public school districts and will not include private schools and state operated programs. Secondly, regional programs were omitted because student data were reported through the home school district. In addition, all students attributed to the local educational agency may not attend comprehensive high schools within the district due to placements in day schools, private residential facilities, facilities outside of the state or other alternative schools created through state initiatives.

Ethical Safeguards

Before any research was initiated, approval was obtained from the College of William and Mary Protection of Human Subjects Committee. In addition, confidentiality was maintained by randomly assigning codes to conceal the identity of the school districts. Since extant data sets were used, there is a disconnect between the researcher and participants which further protects the participants in the study.

CHAPTER 4: Data Analysis

The study examined student disability classifications (SLD, ED, and OHI) and their relationship to graduation outcomes, academic proficiency, size and poverty of school districts within a mid-Atlantic state. The purpose of this study was to test institutional theory's explanation of organizational behavior when accountability measures regarding graduation are imposed on school districts. The relationships between institutional theory and accountability environments of educational institutions have been relatively untested; therefore this study sought to add to the current research base on institutional theory.

The sample for this study included 132 school districts in one mid-Atlantic State. Data requests were made to the State Educational Agency for 2010, 2011, and 2012. Information related to poverty and district sizes were obtained from the NSLP free and reduced price eligibility report and Fall Membership Report on the state's website. Reading and math pass rates on state assessments for 8th grade students were also retrieved from the state's website. Academic proficiency was calculated by summing the pass rates for reading and math 8th grade assessments.

Descriptive Summary

Data for all state reports at the district level were presented in an Excel format. First the raw scores were converted into proportions by dividing by the number of students by disability type by the total number of students with disabilities who exited for each outcome such as Drop-out, Advanced Studies Diploma, Standard Diploma, Modified Standard Diploma, Special Diploma, Certificate of Program Completion, and General Education Development Certificate. Once proportions were calculated the data were converted to SPSS for descriptive and correlation analyses. Descriptive analyses included means and standard

deviations. In addition, correlational statistics were used to determine linear relationships between means.

Results

Results for Research Question 1

As accountability expectations have increased, have there been significant increases in the dropout rate, the proportion of alternative diplomas as well as the proportion of certificates of completion awarded and significant decreases in Standard and Advanced Studies Diplomas obtained in 2003, 2006 and 2009 for students identified as SLD, ED, and OHI?

Two exit outcomes, the GAD and Certificate of Program Completion, indicated lack of use. There were no reports of districts issuing the GAD or Certificate of Program Completion to students identified as SLD, ED, or OHI in the 2003, 2006, or 2009 academic year. Data also indicated that students identified as SLD and ED did not receive GEDs from school districts between 2003, 2006, and 2009. Students identified as OHI did not receive GEDs from school districts in 2003; however, by 2006 they represented 1% of all exiters with disabilities receiving the document and 11% of exit outcomes for students identified as OHI. Similarly in 2009, only 1% of all exiters with disabilities receiving a GED were students identified as OHI; however, the GED represented 9% of exit outcomes.

Dropout. The state educational agency did not provide dropout statistics data for students identified as SLD, ED, and OHI in 2003. Descriptive statistics regarding the school districts reporting dropout data for 2006 and 2009, the proportional mean at the school district level, proportional standard deviation, and percentage of students dropped out to

exiters with other exit outcomes for students identified as SLD, ED, and OHI are provided in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1

Proportion of Students Considered Dropped Out by Disability Type

Year	Percentage of Districts Reporting	Proportional Mean of Dropouts with Disabilities	Proportional *SD*	Proportion of Dropouts to Other Outcomes by Disabilty Type
2006				
SLD	18	.50	.20	.13
ED	7	.29	.12	.34
OHI	5	.28	.20	.12
2009				
SLD	14	.49	.12	.12
ED	8	.26	.10	.36
OHI	8	.25	.10	.13

2006 *N*=48
2009 *N*=45

Research Question 1(a). In 2006, 48 school districts reported dropout statistics for students with disabilities. Students identified as SLD represented 50% (*SD*=.20) of all students with disabilities considered dropouts. In 2009, 45 school districts reported dropout statistics for students with disabilities. Similarly in 2009, students identified as SLD represented almost half of all students with disabilities considered dropped out at 49% (*SD*=.12). However, when compared to exiters of the same disability classification, the dropout proportion decreased by 1% from 13% in 2006 to 12% in 2009.

Research Question 1(b). Students identified as ED represented 29% (*SD* = .12) of all students with disabilities considered dropped out in 2006. In 2009, students identified as ED represented 26% (*SD*=.10) of all students considered dropped out. However, when compared to exiters of the same disability classification, the dropout proportion increased by 2% from 34% in 2006 to 36% in 2009.

Research Question 1(c). Students identified as OHI represented 28% (*SD* = .20) of all students with disabilities considered dropped out in 2006. In 2009, students identified as OHI represented 25% (*SD*=.10) of all students considered dropped out. However, when compared to exiters of the same disability classification, the dropout proportion increased by 1% from .12% in 2006 to .13% in 2009. A line graph representing the percentage of students dropped out when compared to students within the same disability classification leaving with other graduation outcomes is included in Figure 4.1.

Figure 4.1 *Proportions of Students Considered Dropped Out by Disability Type*

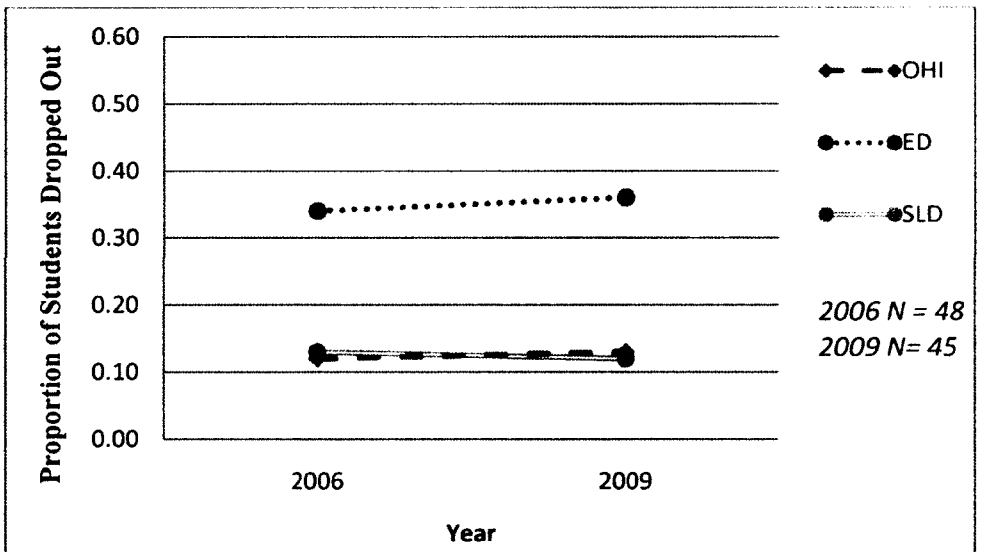


Figure 4.1. Values on the Y axis are in increments of 10.

Modified Standard Diploma. Descriptive statistics regarding the proportion of Modified Standard Diploma school districts reported data from 2003, 2006 and 2009, the proportional mean at the school district level, proportional standard deviation, and percentage of students receiving a Modified Standard Diplomat to exiters with other graduation outcomes for students identified as SLD, ED, and OHI are provided in Table 4.2.

Table 4.2
Proportions of Modified Standard Diplomas Awarded by Disability Type

Year	Percentage of Districts Reporting	Proportional Mean of Exiters with Disabilities	Proportional *SD*	Proportion of Modified Standard to Other Outcomes by Disability Type
2003				
SLD	4	.04	.02	.02
ED	0	0	0	0
OHI	0	0	0	0
2006				
SLD	28	.21	.12	.18
ED	3	.03	.00	.10
OHI	5	.08	.07	.12
2009				
SLD	22	.16	.09	.17
ED	3	.06	.08	.08
OHI	5	.05	.03	.08

2003 *N*=112
2006 *N*=116
2009 *N* =121

Research Question 1(a). In 2003, 112 school districts reported exit outcomes for students with disabilities. Students identified as SLD represented 4% (*SD*=.02) of all students awarded a Modified Standard Diploma. In 2006, 116 school districts reported exit outcomes for students with disabilities. Students identified as SLD represented .21% (*SD*=.12) of all students with disabilities awarded a Modified Standard Diploma. By 2009, 121 school districts reported exit outcomes for students with disabilities. Students identified as SLD represented .16% (*SD*=.09) of all students with disabilities awarded a Modified Standard Diploma. However, when compared to exiters of the same disability classification, the proportion of Modified Standard Diplomas increased from 2% in 2003 to 18% in 2006. Yet a decrease of 1% to 17% occurred in 2009.

Research Question 1(b). Data indicated that districts did not award the Modified Standard Diploma to students identified as ED in 2003. In 2006, students identified as ED represented .03% of all students with disabilities awarded a Modified Standard Diploma. By 2009, students identified as ED represented .06% (*SD*=.08) of all students with disabilities awarded a Modified Standard Diploma. However, when compared to exiters of the same disability classification, the proportion of Modified Standard Diplomas decreased from 10% in 2006 to 08% in 2009.

Research Question 1(c). Data indicate districts did not award the Modified Standard Diploma to students identified as OHI in 2003. In 2006, students identified as OHI represented .08% (*SD*=.07) of all students with disabilities awarded a Modified Standard Diploma. By 2009, a decrease was noted and students identified as OHI represented .05% (*SD*=.03) of all students with disabilities awarded a Modified Standard Diploma. Similarly, when compared to exiters of the same disability classification, the proportion of Modified Standard Diplomas decreased from 12% in 2006 to 08% in 2009. A line graph representing the percentage of students awarded a Modified Standard Diploma when compared to students within the same disability classification leaving with other exit outcomes is included in Figure 4.2.

Figure 4.2. *Proportions of Modified Standard Diplomas by Disability Type*

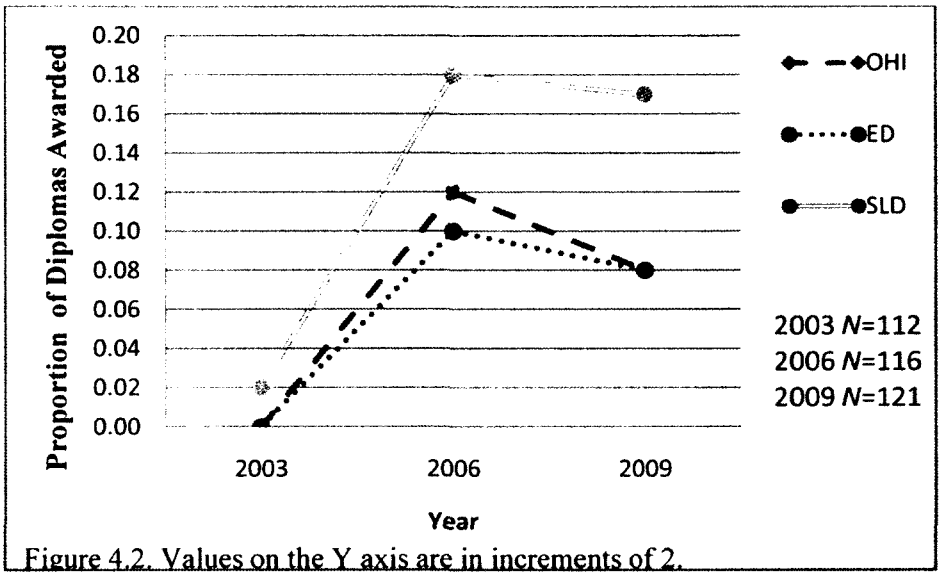


Figure 4.2. Values on the Y axis are in increments of 2.

Special Diploma. Descriptive statistics regarding the proportion of Special Diplomas school districts reported data 2003, 2006 and 2009, the proportional mean at the school district level, proportional standard deviation, and percentage of students receiving a Special Diploma to exiters with other exit outcomes for students identified as SLD, ED, and OHI are provided in Table 4.3

Table 4.3

Proportions of Special Diplomas Awarded by Disability Type

Year	Percentage of Districts Reporting	Proportional Mean of Exiters with Disabilities	Proportional *SD*	Proportion of Special Diplomas to Other Outcomes by Disability Type
2003				
SLD	16	.22	.13	.29
ED	3	.06	.01	.20
OHI	1	.09	.0	.07
2006				
SLD	18	.18	.11	.12
ED	4	.04	.02	.12
OHI	4	.09	.06	.09
2009				
SLD	12	.14	.08	.08
ED	3	.02	.02	.06
OHI	5	.07	.05	.08

2003 *N*=112
2006 *N*=116
2009 *N* =121

Research Question 1(a). In 2003, 112 school districts reported exit outcomes for students with disabilities. Students identified as SLD represented 22% (*SD*=.13) of all students awarded a Special Diploma. In 2006, 116 school districts reported exit outcomes for students with disabilities. Students identified as SLD represented .18% (*SD*=.11) of all students with disabilities awarded a Special Diploma. By 2009, 121 school districts reported exit outcomes for students with disabilities. Students identified as SLD represented .14% (*SD*=.08) of all students with disabilities awarded a Special Diploma. However, when compared to exiters of the same disability classification, the proportion of Special Diplomas decreased over half from 29% in 2003 to 12% in 2006. By 2009, a further decrease of 08% occurred.

Research Question 1(b). Students identified as ED represented 06% (*SD*=.01) of all students awarded a Special Diploma. In 2006, students identified as ED represented .04% (*SD*=.02) of all students with disabilities awarded a Special Diploma. By 2009, students identified as ED represented .02% (*SD*=.02) of all students with disabilities awarded a Special Diploma. However, when compared to exiters of the same disability classification, overall the proportion of Special Diplomas awarded increased. In 2003, the Special Diploma was issued to 20% of students. However a decrease occurred in 2006 with 12% of students identified as ED awarded a Special Diploma. By 2009, the Special Diploma decreased to 6% of exit outcomes for students identified as ED.

Research Question 1(c). Students identified as OHI represented 9% (*SD* =.06) of all students with disabilities awarded a Special Diploma in 2003. By 2006 the proportion of students identified as OHI to all exiters with disabilities remained the same at 9% (*SD* =.06). By 2009 the proportion of students identified as OHI to all graduates with disabilities decreased to 7% (*SD* = .05). However, when compared to exiters of the same disability classification, the proportion of Special Diplomas awarded increased from 7% in 2003 to 9% in 2006. By 2009, the proportion of Special Diplomas decreased to 8% of exit outcomes for students identified as OHI. A line graph representing the percentage of students awarded a Special Diploma when compared to students within the same disability classification leaving with other exit outcomes is included in Figure 4.3.

Figure 4.3. *Proportions of Special Diplomas Awarded by Disability Type*

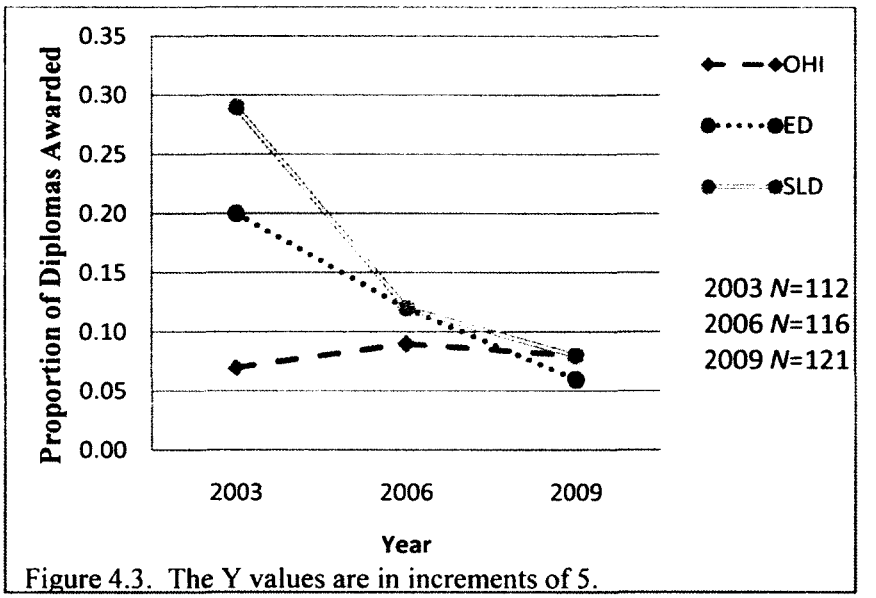


Figure 4.3. The Y values are in increments of 5.

Standard Diploma. The Standard Diploma is offered to general and special education students who have fulfilled all academic requirements. Descriptive statistics regarding the proportion of Standard Diploma school districts reported data 2003, 2006 and 2009, the proportional mean at the school district level, proportional standard deviation, and percentage of students receiving a Standard Diploma to exiters with other exit outcomes for students identified as SLD, ED, and OHI are provided in Table 4.4.

Table 4.4

Proportions of Standard Diplomas Awarded by Disability Type

Year	Percentage of Districts Reporting	Proportional Mean of Exiters with Disabilities	Proportional *SD*	Proportion of Standard Diplomas to Other Outcomes by Disability Type
2003				
SLD	52	.47	.16	.64
ED	6	.12	.11	.76
OHI	8	.12	.04	.88
2006				
SLD	39	.31	.10	.49
ED	5	.08	.07	.40
OHI	11	.11	.03	.51
2009				
SLD	48	.31	.09	.55
ED	7	.06	.03	.45
OHI	19	.14	.07	.55

2003 *N*=112
2006 *N*=116
2009 *N* =121

Research Question 1(a). In 2003, 112 school districts reported exit outcomes for students with disabilities. Students identified as SLD represented 47% (*SD*=.16) of all students awarded a Standard Diploma. In 2006, 116 school districts reported exit outcomes for students with disabilities. Students identified as SLD represented .31% (*SD*=.10) of all students with disabilities awarded a Standard Diploma. By 2009, 121 school districts reported exit outcomes for students with disabilities. Students identified as SLD remained consistent at .31% (*SD*=.09) of all students with disabilities awarded a Standard Diploma. However, when compared to exiters of the same disability classification, the proportion of Standard Diplomas decreased from 64% in 2003 to 49% in 2006. By 2009, a 6% increase occurred and 55% of students identified as SLD received a Standard Diploma.

Research Question 1(b). Students identified as ED represented 12% (*SD*=.11) of all students awarded a Standard Diploma. In 2006, students identified as ED represented .08% (*SD*=.07) of all students with disabilities awarded a Standard Diploma. By 2009, students identified as ED represented .06% (*SD*=.03) of all students with disabilities awarded a Standard Diploma. However, when compared to exiters of the same disability classification, the overall proportion of Standard Diplomas increased. In 2003, the Standard Diploma represented 76% of exit outcomes for students identified as ED. The proportion of Standard Diplomas awarded decreased to 40% in 2006. However, the proportion of Standard Diplomas increased to 45% of exit outcomes for students identified as ED in 2009.

Research Question 1(c). Students identified as OHI represented 12% (*SD*=.04) of all students awarded a Standard Diploma. In 2006, students identified as OHI represented .11% (*SD*=.03) of all students with disabilities awarded a Standard Diploma. By 2009, students identified as OHI represented .14% (*SD*=.07) of all students with disabilities awarded a Standard Diploma. However, when compared to exiters of the same disability classification, the overall proportion of Standard Diplomas increased. In 2003, the Standard Diploma represented 88% of exit outcomes for students identified as OHI. The proportion of Standard Diplomas awarded decreased to 51% in 2006. However, the proportion of Standard Diplomas increased to 55% of exit outcomes for students identified as OHI in 2009. A line graph representing the percentage of students awarded Standard Diplomas when compared to students within the same disability classification leaving with other exit outcomes is included in Figure 4.4.

Figure 4.4. *Proportions of Standard Diplomas Awarded by Disability Type*

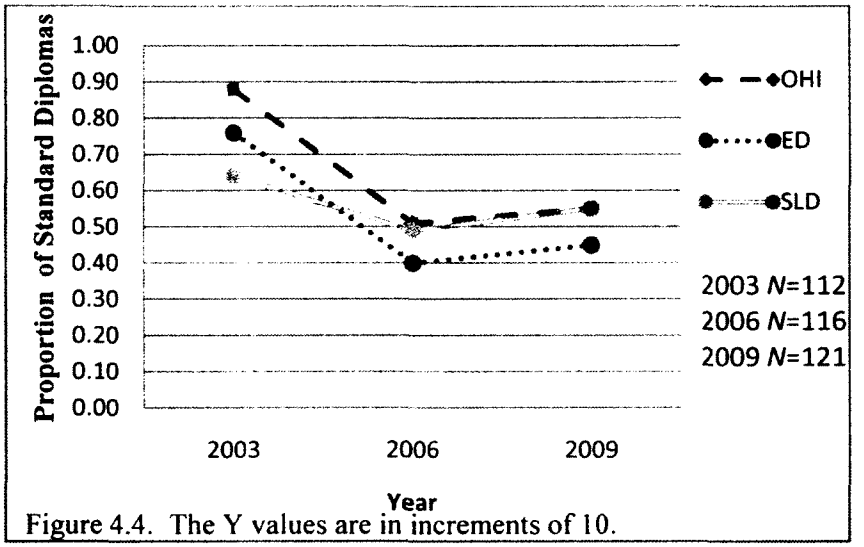


Figure 4.4. The Y values are in increments of 10.

Advanced Studies Diploma. The Advanced Studies Diploma is offered to general and special education students who have fulfilled all academic requirements. Descriptive statistics regarding the proportion of Advanced Studies Diploma school districts reported data 2003, 2006 and 2009, the proportional mean at the school district level, proportional standard deviation, and percentage of students receiving Advanced Studies Diplomas to exiters with other exit outcomes for students identified as SLD, ED, and OHI are provided in Table 4.5.

Table 4.5

Proportions of Advanced Studies Diplomas Awarded by Disability Type

Year	Percentage of Districts Reporting	Proportional Mean of Exiters *with* Disabilities	Proportional *SD*	Proportion of Advanced Studies Diplomas to Other Outcomes by Disability Type
2003				
SLD	1	.13	.08	.05
ED	1	.01	0	.04
OHI	1	.01	.00	.04
2006				
SLD	8	.13	.08	.07
ED	1	.01	0	.03
OHI	2	.01	.02	.05
2009				
SLD	10	.14	.08	.08
ED	2	.01	.01	.04
OHI	3	.03	.01	.07

2003 *N*=112
2006 *N*=116
2009 *N* =121

Research Question 1(a). In 2003, 112 school districts reported exit outcomes for students with disabilities. Students identified as SLD represented 13% (*SD*=.08) of all students awarded an Advanced Studies Diploma. In 2006, 116 school districts reported exit outcomes for students with disabilities. Students identified as SLD still represented .13% (*SD*=.08) of all students with disabilities awarded an Advanced Studies Diploma. By 2009, 121 school districts reported exit outcomes for students with disabilities. Students identified as SLD represented .14% (*SD*=.08) of all students with disabilities awarded an Advanced Studies Diploma. However, when compared to exiters of the same disability classification, the proportion of Advanced Studies Diplomas increased from 5% in 2003 to 7% in 2006. By 2009, a 1% increase occurred and 8% of students identified as SLD received an Advanced Studies Diploma.

Research Question 1(b). Students identified as ED represented 1% of all students awarded an Advanced Studies Diploma in 2003, 2006, and 2009. However, when compared to exiters of the same disability classification, the proportion of Advanced Studies Diplomas decreased from 4% in 2003 to 3% in 2006. By 2009, a 1% increase occurred and 4% of students identified as ED received an Advanced Studies Diploma.

Research Question 1(c). Students identified as OHI represented 1% of all students awarded an Advanced Studies Diploma in 2003 and 2006. By 2009, students identified as OHI represented .3% (*SD*=.01) of all students with disabilities awarded a Standard Diploma. However, when compared to exiters of the same disability classification, the proportion of Advanced Studies Diplomas increased from 5% in 2003 to 7% in 2006. By 2009, a 1% increase occurred and 8% of students identified as OHI received an Advanced Studies Diploma. A line graph representing the percentage of students awarded Advanced Studies Diplomas when compared to students within the same disability classification leaving with other exit outcomes is included in Figure 4.5.

Figure 4.5. *Proportion of Advanced Studies Diplomas Awarded by Disability Type*

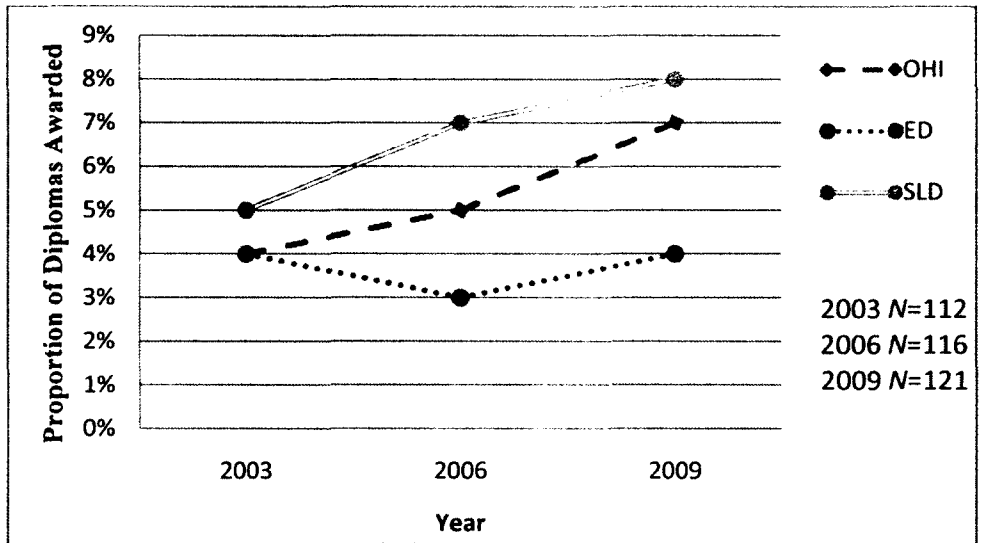


Figure 4.5. The Y values are in increments of 1.

Results for Research Question 2

To what extent is the exit outcome (e.g., Advanced Studies Diploma, Standard Diploma, Modified Standard Diploma, Special Diploma, Certificate of Program Completion, and GED Certificate and Drop-Out) obtained by students identified as SLD correlated with the school district's size, poverty, and reading and math proficiency in 2009? A summary of the correlational analysis is presented in Table 4.6.

Table 4.6

Pearson Correlation for School District Analysis: Exit Outcomes, Size, Poverty, and Reading and Math Proficiency for Students Identified as SLD

Exit Outcome	Districts Reporting	District Context Variables		
		Size	Poverty	Reading/ Math Proficiency
Advanced Studies Diploma	61	-.03	-.09	.09
Standard Diploma	119	.03	**-.24****	.16
Modified Standard Diploma	110	-.08	-.01	.13
Special Diploma	87	-.19	**.45****	**-.28****
Certificate of Completion	13	-.38	.41	.10
GED	50	**-.46****	.21	-.06
Dropout	19	-.14	.19	.04

*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level
**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level

School District Size. A significant negative relationship for students identified as SLD was found between the size of the school district and the GED ($r = -46$, $p < .01$), thus, the smaller the district the more likely the district to award a GED. No significant relationship was found between the size of the district and graduate outcomes such as the Advanced Studies Diploma, Standard Diploma, Modified Standard Diploma, Special Diploma, Certificate of Completion, and Drop-Out.

School District Poverty. Significant relationships were found between the poverty level of the school district and the exit outcomes such as the Standard Diploma and Special Diploma for students identified as SLD. A significant negative relationship was found between the poverty and the Standard Diploma ($r = -.24$, $p<.01$), indicating as the poverty level increases the number of Standard Diplomas decrease. A significant positive relationship was found between poverty and the number of Special Diplomas ($r = .45$, $p<.01$), issued by school districts indicating that as poverty increases so does the number of

Special Diplomas. No significant relationship was found between poverty and the Advanced Studies Diploma, Modified Standard Diploma, Certificate of Completion, GED, and Drop-out.

School District Reading and Math Proficiency. Data analysis revealed a significant negative relationship for students identified as SLD between the composite reading and math proficiency of school districts and the Special Diploma (r = -.28, p <.01). This indicates that as composite reading and math proficiency increases, the number of Special Diplomas awarded decreases. There was no significant relationship between reading and math proficiency and the Advanced Studies Diploma, Standard Diploma, Modified Standard Diploma, Certificate of Completion, GED, and Drop-Out.

Conclusion. For students identified as SLD, significant relationships were found for exit outcomes such as the Standard Diploma, Special Diploma and GED. A significant negative relationship for students identified as SLD existed between the size of the school district and the GED (r = -.46, p< .01), indicating that as the district size grew larger, fewer GEDs were awarded. A significant negative relationship was found between the poverty and the Standard Diploma (r = -.24, p<.01), indicating as the poverty level increases the number of Standard Diplomas decrease. Poverty was positively related to Special Diplomas (r = .45, p<.01), indicating that as poverty increases so does the number of Special Diplomas. There was a significant negative relationship for students identified as SLD between the reading and math proficiency composite of the school district and the Special Diploma (r = -.28, p <.01), indicating that a decrease in the reading and math proficiency increased the amount of Special Diplomas awarded by school districts. Caution should be given to the Certificate of Completion and Dropout results due to the small number of districts reporting on these exit

outcomes for students identified as SLD. This gives the results low statistical power; thereby, making a meaningful effect difficult to detect even if it were present.

Results for Research Question 3

To what extent is the exit outcome (e.g., Advanced Studies Diploma, Standard Diploma, Modified Standard Diploma, Special Diploma, Certificate of Program Completion, and GED and Drop-Out) obtained by students identified as ED correlated with the school district's size, poverty, and reading and math proficiency in 2009? A summary of the correlational analysis is presented in Table 4.7.

Table 4.7
Pearson Correlation for School District Analysis: Exit Outcomes, Size, Poverty, and Reading and Math Proficiency for Students Identified as ED

Exit Outcomes	Districts Reporting	District Context Variables		
		Size	Poverty	Reading/ Math Composite
Advanced Studies Diploma	19	-.27	-.41	-.21
Standard Diploma	77	.04	-.01	.02
Modified Standard Diploma	64	-.18	-.01	-.07
Special Diploma	68	**-.28***	**.29***	-.04
Certificate of Completion	3	-.82	.30	-.77
GED	68	**-.33***	.18	-.02
Dropout	11	-.48	-.14	.08

*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level
**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level

School District Size. Significant negative relationships were found between the size of the school district and the Special Diploma (r = -.28, p<.05) and GED (r =-.33, p<.05), exit outcomes. This indicates as the district becomes smaller the number of Special Diplomas and GEDs awarded increase. No significant relationships for students identified as ED were found between the size of the school district and exit outcomes such as the Advanced Studies

Diploma, Standard Diploma, Modified Standard Diploma, Certificate of Completion, and Drop-Out.

School District Poverty. A significant positive relationship was found between the poverty level of the school district and Special Diplomas ($r = .29$, $p<.05$) indicating the poorer the district the greater number of Special Diplomas awarded. No significant relationships for students identified as ED were found between the poverty of the school district and exit outcomes such as the Advanced Studies Diploma, Standard Diploma, Modified Standard Diploma, Certificate of Completion, GED, and Drop-Out.

School Districts Reading and Math Proficiency. Data analysis revealed no significant relationship for students identified as ED between the reading and math proficiency of the school district and exit outcomes such as the Advanced Studies Diploma, Standard Diploma, Modified Standard Diploma, Special Diploma, Certificate of Completion, General Education Development Certificate, and Drop-Out.

Conclusion. For students identified as ED, as indicated below significant relationships were found for exit outcomes such as the Special Diploma and GED. There was a significant negative relationship between the size of the school district and the Special Diploma ($r = -.28$, $p<.05$), exit outcome for students identified as ED. This indicated as the size of the school district increased the number of Special Diplomas awarded decreased. A significant positive relationship was found between the poverty level of the school district and Special Diplomas ($r = .29$, $p<.05$) for students identified as ED. This indicated as the level of poverty increased so did the number of Special Diplomas awarded. A significant negative relationship was found between the GED and the size of the school district for students identified as ED ($r =-.33$, $p<.05$). This indicated that as the size of the district

increased the number of GEDs awarded decreased. Caution should be given to the Advanced Studies Diploma, Certificate of Completion and Dropout results due to the small number of districts reporting on these exit outcomes for students identified as ED. This gives the results low statistical power; thereby, making a meaningful effect difficult to detect even if it were present.

Results for Research Question 4

To what extent is the exit outcome (e.g., Advanced Studies Diploma, Standard Diploma, Modified Standard Diploma, Special Diploma, Certificate of Program Completion, and GED and Drop-Out) obtained by students identified as OHI correlated with the school district's size, poverty, and reading and math proficiency in 2009? A summary of the correlational analysis is presented in Table 4.8.

Table 4.8
Pearson Correlation for School District Analysis: Exit Outcomes, Size, Poverty, and Reading and Math Proficiency for Students Identified as OHI

Exit Outcomes	Districts Reporting	District Context Variables		
		Size	Poverty	Reading Math Composite
Advanced Studies Diploma	48	-.16	.02	-.04
Standard Diploma	102	.01	**-.37****	**.31****
Modified Standard Diploma	92	**-.25***	.12	-.03
Special Diploma	76	**-.31****	.21	.05
Certificate of Completion	8	-.60	**.82***	-.43
GED	37	**-.41***	.22	-.17
Dropout	10	-.51	.09	.12

*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level
**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level

School District Size. Significant negative relationships were found between the size of the school district and exit outcomes Modified Standard Diploma(r = -.25, p<.05); Special Diploma (r = -.31, p<.01); and GED (r =-.41, p<.05). This indicated the smaller the school

district the greater number of Modified Standard Diplomas and Special Diplomas awarded. No significant relationships for students identified as OHI were found between the size of the school district and exit outcomes such as the Advanced Studies Diploma, Standard Diploma, Certificate of Completion, and Drop-Out.

School District Poverty. A significant negative relationship was found between the poverty level of the school district and Standard Diplomas (r =.-37, p<.01) indicating the poorer the school district the fewer number of Standard Diplomas awarded. A positive relationship was found between poverty and the Certificate of Completion (r= .82, p<.05). No significant relationships for students identified as OHI were found between the poverty of the school district and exit outcomes such as the Advanced Studies Diploma, Modified Standard Diploma, Special Diploma, GED, and Drop-Out.

School District Reading and Writing Proficiency. The results revealed a significant positive relationship for students identified as OHI between the reading and math proficiency of the school district and the Standard Diploma(r = .31, p<.01). This indicates as the district's reading math proficiency increased so did the number of Standard Diplomas awarded. No other significant relationships were found for exit outcomes such as the Advanced Studies Diploma, Modified Standard Diploma, Special Diploma, Certificate of Completion, General Education Development Certificate, and Dropout.

Conclusion. For students identified as OHI, significant relationships were found as indicated below for exit outcomes such as the Standard Diploma, Modified Diploma, Special Diploma and GED. Significant negative relationships were found for students identified as OHI with the Modified Standard Diploma(r = -.25, p<.05) and Special Diploma (r = -.31, p<.01). This indicated that as the district size became smaller the number of Modified and

Special Diploma issued increased. The GED was negatively related to size of the school district for students identified as OHI(r -.33, p<.05) which indicated as the size of the district increased the number of GEDs awarded by school districts decreased. A significant negative relationship was found between poverty and Standard Diplomas (r =.-37, p<.01) for students identified as OHI. This indicated as the poverty of the school district increased the number of Standard Diplomas decreased. A significant positive relationship was found between the reading and math proficiency of the school district and the Standard Diploma (r = .307, p<.01). This indicated that as the reading and math performance of the school district increased so did the number of Standard Diplomas awarded.

Summary of Results

The purpose of this study was to test institutional theory's explanation of organizational behavior when accountability measures regarding graduation are imposed on school districts. Exit outcomes were reviewed for students identified as SLD, ED, and OHI. In addition, the exit outcomes were analyzed to determine if a relationship existed between context variables such as academic proficiency, size, and poverty level of the school district.

Exit Outcomes

Dropout. Dropout statistics were reported for two data points instead of three because the state educational agency did not provide results for the 2003 academic school year. Although the dropout rate decreased by 1% for students identified as SLD, it increased for students identified as ED and OHI between 2006 and 2009. Dropout represented the second highest exit outcome for students identified as ED and OHI between 2006 and 2009 (see Appendix B.2 and C.3). Results did not fully support the hypothesis that the dropout rate would decrease for students identified as SLD, ED, and OHI between 2006 and 2009.

Modified Standard Diploma. In 2003, the Modified Standard Diploma represented 2% of exit documents awarded to students identified as SLD. Students identified as ED and OHI were not awarded this diploma type. Between 2006 and 2009, a decrease in the proportion of Modified Standard Diploma awarded occurred for all three disability types. The Modified Standard Diploma remained the second highest exit outcome for students for with SLD. For students identified as ED, the Modified Standard Diploma only surpassed the proportion of Advanced Studies Diplomas ranking next to last of exit outcomes in 2006. However three years later, the proportion of Modified Standard Diplomas awarded surpassed the Special Diploma making it the third highest exit outcome school in 2009 for students identified as ED. For students identified as OHI, the Modified Standard Diploma was the second highest exit outcome although it was tied with Dropout in 2006. By 2009, the Modified Diploma tied with the Special Diploma ranking it the next to last of exit outcomes for students identified as OHI (see Appendix A.1, B.2, and C.3). Results did not fully support the hypothesis that the proportion of Modified Standard Diplomas, an alternate diploma option, would increase for students identified as SLD, ED, and OHI for the years 2003, 2006, and 2009.

Special Diploma. In 2003, the Special Diploma was the second highest exit outcome for students identified as SLD, ED, and OHI. Between 2003 and 2006, the proportion of Special Diplomas decreased for students identified as SLD and ED becoming the third highest exit outcome for both disability types. It is interesting to note that although the proportion of Special Diplomas increased for students identified as OHI in 2006, the diploma type was actually next to last of the exit outcomes only surpassing the Advanced Studies Diploma. Between 2006 and 2009, the Special Diploma decreased for all disability types

becoming the second less frequently used exit outcome for students identified as SLD, ED, and OHI (see Appendix A.1, B.2, and C.3). Results did not fully support the hypothesis that the proportion of Special Diplomas would increase for students identified as SLD, ED, and OHI for the years 2003, 2006, and 2009.

GED. Data suggests that students identified as SLD or ED were not issued the GED for the years 2003, 2006, and 2009. However, in 2006 the GED was the third highest exit outcome for students identified as OHI and tied with the Modified Standard Diploma for the third most frequently used exit outcome in 2009 (see Appendix A.1, B.2, and C.3). Results did not fully support the hypothesis that the proportion of GEDs, a certificate option, would increase for students identified as SLD, ED, and OHI between 2003, 2006, and 2009.

Standard Diploma. The proportion of Standard Diplomas decreased between 2003 and 2006 for all disability types. By 2009, however the proportion of Standard Diplomas increased for students identified as SLD, ED, and OHI. The proportion of Standard Diplomas awarded was the highest exit outcome for all disability classifications for all three years (see Appendix A.1, B.2, and C.3). The results did not fully support the hypothesis that the proportion of Standard Diplomas would decrease for the years 2003, 2006, and 2009.

Advanced Studies Diploma. Between 2003 and 2006, the proportion of Advanced Studies Diplomas awarded increased for students identified as SLD and OHI and remained the same for students identified as ED. By 2009, the proportion of Advanced Studies Diplomas issued increased for all three disability types. This diploma type continued to be the least frequently used exit outcome for students identified as SLD, ED, and OHI in 2003, 2006, and 2009 (see Appendix A.1, B.2, and C.3). The results did not fully support the

hypothesis that the proportion of Advanced Studies Diplomas would decrease for the years 2003, 2006, and 2009.

School District Context Variables

The second through fourth research questions examined to what extent is the exit outcome (e.g., Advanced Studies Diploma, Standard Diploma, Modified Standard Diploma, Special Diploma, Certificate of Program Completion, and GED and Dropout obtained by students identified as SLD, ED and OHI correlated with the school district's size, poverty level and reading and math proficiency in 2009.

School District Size. Relationships were found between the size of the district and exit outcomes such as the Modified Standard Diploma, Special Diploma, and GED. For students identified as OHI, the Modified Standard Diploma was negatively related to the size of the district indicating as the district became larger the number of Modified Standard Diplomas awarded decreased. The Special Diploma was also negatively related to the size of the school district for students identified as OHI and ED. This finding indicates as the district size becomes smaller the number of Special Diplomas awarded becomes greater. For students identified as SLD and ED, the GED was negatively related to size of the school district meaning as the size of the district increased the number of GEDs awarded by school districts decreased. There was no significant relationship between the size of the school district and the exit outcomes such as the Advanced Standard Diploma, Standard Diploma, Certificate of Completion, or Dropout for all three disability classifications studied. The results did not fully support the hypothesis that there would be no relationship between exit outcomes and the size of the school district in 2009.

School District Poverty Level. A negative relationship was found between poverty and Standard Diplomas for students identified as SLD and OHI indicating that as the poverty of the school district increased the number of Standard Diplomas decreased. Significantly, poverty was positively related to Special Diplomas for students with Specific Learning Disabilities and Emotional Disabilities, meaning that as the poverty level increased so did the number of Special Diplomas awarded. There was no significant relationship between the poverty of the school district and exit outcomes such as the Advanced Standard Diploma, Modified Standard Diploma, GED, and Dropout for Students identified as SLD, ED, or OHI. The results did not fully support the hypothesis of no relationship between exit outcomes and the poverty level of the school district in 2009.

Reading and Math Proficiency. There was a significant negative relationship for students identified as SLD between the reading and math proficiency of the school district and the Special Diploma indicating that a decrease in the reading and math proficiency increased the number of Special Diplomas awarded by school districts. For students identified as OHI there was a significant positive relationship between the reading and math composite of the school district and the Standard Diploma indicating that as the reading and math performance of the school district increased so did the number of Standard Diplomas awarded. There was no significant association between the reading and math composite of the school district and exit outcomes such as the Advanced Standard Diploma, Modified Standard Diploma, Certificate of Completion, GED, and Dropout for Students identified as SLD, ED, or OHI. The results did not fully support the hypothesis of no relationship between exit outcomes and the reading and math proficiency of the school district in 2009.

CHAPTER 5: Discussion

Overview of Findings

This purpose of this study was to test the institutional theory explanation of organizational behavior when accountability measures regarding graduation are imposed on school districts. According to institutional theory, legitimacy drives the strategic response of school districts. The desire to appear socially acceptable and credible overrides concern over organizational efficiency (Scott, 1995). This research explored Dimaggio and Powell's (1983) explanation of how educational organizations form powerful connections that materialize to make them become more similar or isomorphic to each other. The theory posits that there are three mechanisms through which organizational change happens (a) coercive isomorphism occurs from political influence and issues of legitimacy (b) mimetic isomorphism results from typical responses to uncertainty, and (c) normative isomorphism relates to professionalization to define methods and conditions of the working environment. The results of this study support institutional theory that organizational change does not occur through coercive methods alone, but also by similar responses to uncertainty influenced by environmental contexts.

With accountability reform focused on increased graduation outcomes, exiting students without documented completion of an educational program is viewed as a less legitimate option for school districts. As a result, a decrease in the proportion of students considered dropped out was expected for students identified as SLD, ED, and OHI. Proportions for dropout could not be determined for the 2003 academic year; however, the proportion of dropouts did decrease from 2006 to 2009 for students identified as SLD.

With the development of state recognized alternate routes to graduation, a decrease in the proportion of Standard and Advanced Diplomas awarded between 2003, 2006, and 2009 was expected; however, the two exit outcomes studied actually increased at some point between those years. The Standard Diploma remains the highest exit outcome for students identified as SLD, ED, and OHI.

Other exit options such as the GAD, Certificate of Completion, Modified Standard Diploma, Special Diploma, and GED, did not increase as expected in 2003, 2006, and 2009. Data revealed that the GAD and Certificate of Completion were rarely used. This suggests, between 2006 and 2009, that students identified as SLD, ED, and OHI experienced success in more credit bearing classes as evidenced by the lower proportion of Special Diplomas obtained. It appears that the GED is an exit outcome more often used in smaller school districts.

The results of the study also suggest the environmental contexts facing school districts affected the proportion of students considered dropped out and the proportion of Standard Diplomas and Advanced Studies Diplomas awarded. Although the proportion of Standard Diplomas awarded increased from 2006 to 2009, the proportion of Standard Diplomas reached the highest peak in 2002 before NCLB created a high stakes environment. The proportion of Advanced Studies Diplomas increased all three years for students identified as SLD and OHI; however, data related to Advanced Studies Diploma should be interpreted with caution due to the small number of reporting school districts. In addition, the proportion of students considered dropped out increased for students with ED, and OHI between 2006 and 2009.

The findings did not fully support the hypotheses for exit outcomes including Dropout, Modified Standard Diploma, Special Diploma, Standard Diploma, Advanced Studies Diploma, and GED for students identified as SLD, ED, and OHI between 2003, 2006, and 2009. Nor did the findings completely support no significant relationships between exit outcomes and district contexts such as size, poverty, and reading and writing proficiency.

Significant relationships were found among exit outcomes and district contexts such as size, poverty level and reading and math proficiency. The size of the district was negatively related to the Modified Standard Diploma, Special Diploma, and GED meaning as the size of the district became smaller the greater number of Modified Standard, Special Diploma and GEDs awarded. Poverty was negatively related to the Standard Diploma and positively related to the Special Diploma. The reading and math proficiency of the district was positively related to the Standard Diploma and negatively related to the Special Diploma.**Contributions to Theory**

The accountability reform movement served to constrain organizational behaviors through regulatory processes. The tenets of the accountability reform movement employ a classical organizational perspective focused on meeting targeted goals in the most efficient manner. Using principles introduced by Fayol (1949), management of organizational processes focus on the type of work done within the organization through annual planning, sanctions, professional development, and audits.

With the passage of NCLB (2001) and IDEA (2004) federal requirements related to assessments, annual achievement benchmarks, attendance, graduation and state reporting changed the environment in which the state and school districts operated. The mid-Atlantic

state that was the focus of the study introduced many policies which changed the rules for school districts such as new diploma types; introduction of the Individual Student Alternative Education Plan; verified credits to obtain the Standard Diploma; plans of improvement for schools that did not meet accreditation requirements; new guidelines for students' with disabilities participation in statewide assessments; focused monitoring; and public reporting (*Options for Earning Verified Credit for Graduation*, 2003; *School Improvement Planning Processes for Schools Rated Accredited with Warning*, 2003; *Individual Student Alternative Education Plan (ISAEP) Program Guidelines*, Revised, 2003; *Requirements for the General Achievement Diploma*, 2003; *Academic Reviews for Schools Rated Accredited with Warning in a Specific Academic Area or Areas*, 2003; *Special Education State Performance Plan Reporting Data to the Public,* 2007; and *Special Education General Supervision and Monitoring Activities*, 2007).

Although rule setting, monitoring, and sanctioning through the legislative process is a coercive way to mandate change toward specific goals, it works primarily through resource dependence (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). Institutional theory suggests that when accountability measures are imposed on school districts, they invent strategic responses in order to maintain legitimacy and garner resources.

Dropout

Having students exit school early without a symbol of school completion is not an indicator of social legitimacy because it contradicts the state's mission to graduate students that are ready for postsecondary education and employment. In addition, it is such an important social issue that there is a national center focused on dropout prevention. In 2006, the national average of dropout by disability type was 25% for students identified as SLD;

45% for students identified as ED; and 23% for students identified as OHI (*The 30th Annual Report to Congress*, 2008). When compared to national data, the mid-Atlantic state's outcomes appear lower than the national average. In 2006, the mid-Atlantic state's proportion of dropout by disability type was 13% for students identified as SLD; 34% for students identified as ED; and 12% for students identified as OHI. In 2009, the proportion decreased by 1% for students identified as SLD; increased by 2% for students identified as ED; and increased 1% for students identified as OHI.

It appears from the results of this study that accountability mandates may be improving school completion outcome, especially for students identified as SLD who demonstrated a decrease in the proportion of dropouts between 2006 and 2009. There are still however a disproportionate number of students identified as ED who are not completing secondary education. Within the mid-Atlantic state context, students identified as ED actually represent only 6% of the total population of the students with disabilities. It is still concerning that the proportion of students identified as ED considered dropouts were six times the state average in 2009.

Modified Standard Diploma

Prior to implementation of NCLB, the mid-Atlantic state developed its own accountability system introducing the Modified Standard Diploma, a document with fewer requirements, as an exit option for students with disabilities. Between 2003 and 2006, the proportion of Modified Standard Diplomas increased for students identified as SLD, ED and OHI; however, the proportion of Modified Standard Diplomas decreased between 2006 and 2009 for all three disability classifications. This study hypothesized school districts would meet the accountability demand by increasing the use of alternate diplomas.

A possible explanation for the increase between 2003 and 2006 was school district response to the state's accountability system where the Modified Standard Diploma was an acceptable strategy to use for students with disabilities. The political environment changed, however, with the passage of NCLB. This legislation created a high-stakes environment for the mid-Atlantic state with new directives related to assessments, annual achievement benchmarks, attendance, graduation and state reporting.

The Modified Standard Diploma lost legitimacy at the federal level with the enactment of NCLB because the graduation calculation rate only included the Advanced Studies and Standard Diploma. As a result, the Modified Standard Diploma was not as favorable for the state when compared to its counterparts because public reporting shows a lower graduation rate. The use of the Modified Standard Diploma by school districts as an exit option for students identified as SLD, ED, and OHI declined between 2006 and 2009.

Current Context. Recent changes to the state legislative code will have the state and local school districts renegotiating graduation strategies for students with disabilities. With a lack of social legitimacy and an increased possibility of sanctions due to the lower graduation rate, the mid-Atlantic state's General Assembly introduced and passed legislation to eliminate the Modified Standard Diploma. House Bill 1061 amends graduation requirements and eliminates the Modified Standard Diploma beginning with first-time ninth grade students in the 2013-2014 academic years. Additional language was added in the bill that the Board shall make provisions in its regulations for students with disabilities to earn a standard diploma. In addition, the General Assembly communicated that the Advanced Studies diploma be the first option for students pursuing baccalaureate study. The intent of the

General Assembly is that the Standard and Advanced Studies Diploma prepare students for post-secondary education and the career readiness to support the state's economy.

Contextual Variables Matter

Although data revealed an increase in positive outcomes for students identified as SLD, ED, and OHI, significant relationships between exit outcomes and environmental contexts such as size, poverty and reading and math proficiency exist. This supports institutional theory's supposition that organizations are influenced by more than specificity of goals and bureaucratic structure (Dimaggio & Powell, 1983).

Size. When faced with accountability demands, smaller districts are awarding more Modified Standard Diplomas, Special Diplomas, and GEDs. Seventy-seven percent of school districts in the State have a student enrollment of 6000 students or less. It is interesting to note that the size of the school district was the only environmental context with a significant relationship to the GED. This could indicate smaller districts face different constraints than larger school districts. Since the superintendent has to approve a GED program for students' under18, this exit option may be used as a strategy to reach at risk students in danger of dropping out of school. Although the state recognizes the GED as a dropout statistic, attainment of a GED credential is viewed by some as a "second chance" to certify high school education and move to better employment and higher education. It is a major indicator of success for adult learning centers and workforce investment programs (Song & Hsu, 2008). For students identified as SLD and ED, the GED was negatively related to size of the school district meaning that as the size of the district increased the number of GEDs awarded by school districts decreased.

For students identified as OHI, the size of the district was negatively related to the Modified Standard Diploma and Special Diploma meaning the smaller the school district the more Modified Standard Diplomas and Special Diplomas awarded. The Special Diploma was also negatively related to the size of the school district for students identified as ED meaning the smaller the school district the more Special Diplomas awarded. Small districts face unique challenges such as a reduced infrastructure, and staff assuming many responsibilities.

Poverty. Poverty was negatively related to the Standard Diploma for students identified as SLD and OHI meaning the more affluent the school district the more Standard Diplomas awarded. Poverty was positively related to the Special Diploma for students identified as SLD and ED meaning the poorer the district the more Special Diplomas awarded. The negative correlation between poverty and the Standard Diploma paired with the positive correlation between poverty and the Special Diploma represent opposite ends of the continuum with relation to credit requirements and state assessment requirements. Whereas the Standard Diploma requires at least 22 standard units of credit by passing required courses and electives, and earning at least six verified credits by passing end-of-course state mandated tests or other assessments, the only requirement for the Special Diploma is a decision by the IEP team that the goals have been attained.

Poorer districts face constraints such as limited revenue capacity due to lower per capita income and increased number of students eligible for free or reduced lunch. Eighty-one percent of districts in the state have between 31 and 59% of students receiving free or reduced lunch. Operating in a similar environmental context, this would affect the instructional expenditures per pupil; decrease the ability to attract highly qualified staff with

competitive salaries; and limit the structural complexity to offer a variety of course offerings or flexibility in programming for students with disabilities.

Achievement. The reading and math proficiency of the district was positively related to the Standard Diploma for students identified as OHI and negatively related to the Special Diploma for students identified as SLD. The results of this study support that exit outcomes for higher- performing school districts are related to educational programming were students identified as OHI and SLD are enrolled in more credit bearing classes and exposed to the general education curriculum.

The results of this study support institutional theory in that organizational change does not occur through coercive methods alone, but also by similar responses to uncertainty influenced by the environment. Accountability created the same legal environment for school districts in the state; however, context variables such as district size, poverty, and level of student achievement influenced how school districts' negotiated demands and approached graduation for students identified as SLD, ED, and OHI.

Recommendations for Further Research

Policymakers continue to mandate organizational change through the legislative process. House Bill 1061 eliminates the Modified Standard Diploma and tasks the state's Department of Education to make provisions for students with disabilities to earn a Standard Diploma. Further research could examine how the state educational agency negotiates the legislative changes to develop provisions for students with disabilities to earn a Standard Diploma and to what extent technical support is differentiated according to context variables such as district size, poverty level and student achievement.

A provision in the House Bill 1061 also requires the Standard and Advanced Studies Diploma to have a concentration in career and technical education as well as a requirement for the completion of at least one virtual course. Depending on the context of school district this could have additional fiscal implications related to course requirements, technical infrastructure, and personnel. Further research could examine what extent districts facing similar environmental constraints mimic or implement comparable strategies and how these strategies affect graduation outcomes.

Although the proportion of dropouts appear to be below the national average, dropout prevention strategies are still necessary. In 2009, dropout was the second highest exit outcome for students identified as OHI and ED. With the removal of the Modified Standard Diploma, the dropout rate may also increase for students identified as SLD. The GED is an exit outcome used more by smaller districts although its completion still counts as a dropout statistic. However, students with this diploma option have greater opportunities for pursuing 2-year and 4-year post-secondary opportunities through the state's community college program. Future research can examine to what extent school districts implement second chance programs offering the GED to students with disabilities.

As policymakers advocate that the Advanced Studies Diploma should become the diploma option for students intending to get a baccalaureate education; this exit outcome is the least frequently used for students identified as SLD, ED, and OHI. In 2009, 87% of school districts did not have any student with ED graduating with an Advanced Studies Diploma and 64% of districts did not award the Advanced Studies Diploma to students identified as OHI. Students identified as SLD fared better; however, there were still 37% of school districts where students identified as SLD did not get an Advanced Studies Diploma.

Future research could examine what strategies school districts implement to increase the proportion of Advanced Studies Diplomas awarded.

Results of this study indicated the GAD and Certificate of Completion are exit outcomes largely unimplemented at comprehensive high schools with SLD, ED, and OHI. Further research could evaluate these exit options policies to determine to what extent are the policies solving the problem intended. For example, 18 year old students may not be awarded the GAD as an exit outcome; however, the GAD is more frequently used in adult education programs.

Implications for Practice

The results of this study have implications for policymakers who set the overarching policies for the state, school districts who apply the policies according to the environmental context in which they operate, and IEP teams who are tasked to develop and implement specialized instruction to meet the student's needs in preparation for graduation.

Policymakers. The results of this study can give policymakers a snapshot of the intended and unintended outcomes of accountability policy for students identified as SLD, ED, and OHI in the mid-Atlantic state which can be useful as the state educational agency moves forward to develop provisions for offering the Standard Diploma to students with disabilities. The state educational agency can also use the findings to help implement its statewide system for providing assistance to school districts in order to meet NCLB requirements.

In addition, the results of the study alert policymakers that the environmental context impacts how the district responds to policies and guidelines. Regional representation is often considered when seeking input from stakeholder groups; however, the state would benefit

from creating stakeholder groups of district leaders who face similar constraints due to the district's size which may require differentiated or more extensive supports in implementing policy changes.

School Districts. School leaders set the vision for the district. Focusing on outcomes and making data-driven decisions regarding programming to meet the goal is important. Special education administrators can apply the same principles of backward design as described by Wiggins and McTighe (1998) to graduation outcomes for students with disabilities. School leaders can use the data from state reporting to review the outcome data of the school district and identify areas for improvement. When developing desired results, each level of K-12 education should be involved and understand the impact of decision making on graduation outcomes for students with disabilities.

Examining trend data may also be beneficial, since the state's legislative body determined the Modified Standard Diploma is no longer available for students with disabilities. While the state is hopeful that students with disabilities will move forward to obtain an Advanced Studies or Standard Diploma, there is also the possibility that educational outcomes will move in the opposite direction with more students exiting with Special Diplomas or nothing at all.

Upon review of data, it becomes clear that school districts still have a legal obligation to educate students. Since 2006, almost half of exiters with SLD, ED, and OHI left secondary education without a standard diploma. School districts should consider to what extent programming is in place for students who exit school without a Standard Diploma and choose to come back and work toward it.

Although the GED is currently considered a dropout statistic, perhaps school districts should consider offering this option to students with disabilities who have dropped out or are at risk even with implementation of school-based interventions. While it may not help the school district meet AYP, it could possibly influence future revenue of the school district. The GED is a widely accepted document for employment and postsecondary education.

Individualized Education Program (IEP) Team. According to IDEA regulations, the IEP team is required to draft, review, or change a written statement related to the specially designed instruction and related services necessary to meet the individual's needs (34 CFR 300.23). The desired end result is for students to leave secondary education with an exit outcome most closely aligned with student ability. The IEP team should have a data-driven perspective of the student's functional and academic performance which influences goals, services, and instruction in the least restrictive environment.

The IEP team's knowledge of curriculum, assessments, and diploma options, and their relationship to outcomes such as postsecondary education, vocational education, employment, and independent living is essential. Although IDEA does not require the IEP team to consider a course of study until the age of 14, it may be beneficial for the team to review the educational progress toward an Advanced Studies or Standard diploma at annual IEP review meetings to make sure consideration is given to the impact of current decisions on future outcomes.

Final Thoughts

The purpose of the study was to examine school districts' responses to educational policy regarding graduation outcomes for students with disabilities. It is promising that the proportions of Special Diplomas and Modified Standard Diplomas were decreasing, while

the proportion of Standard Diplomas increased. As school districts negotiate accountability requirements imposed by federal and state policies regarding graduation outcomes for students with disabilities, it is important to recognize how context variables impact district practices.

Prior to the implementation of high stakes testing and alternate diplomas, the mid-Atlantic state offered the Standard Diploma, Special Diploma, and Advanced Studies Diploma. With the passage of House Bill 1061, the state appears to being going back to this diploma option model again. While, the proportion of Modified Standard Diplomas decreased between 2006 and 2009, it offered districts another option for a diploma. For students identified as SLD, proportionally, the Modified Standard Diploma was the second highest exit outcome in 2009. The attainment gap for the Standard Diploma widens, however, for students identified as ED and OHI, because dropout was the second highest exit outcome in 2009. Continued examination of graduation trends, educational programming, and targeted technical assistance is needed to ensure that the elimination of the Modified Standard Diploma continues to elevate the proportion of Standard and Advanced Studies Diplomas awarded, while decreasing the proportion of dropout and Special Diplomas awarded to students identified as SLD, ED, and OHI.

Appendix A

Table A.1
Ranked Exit Outcomes by Disability Types in 2003

Students identified as SLD	Students identified as ED	Students identified as OHI
Standard Diploma	Standard Diploma	Standard Diploma
Special Diploma	Special Diploma	Special Diploma
Advanced Studies Diploma	Advanced Studies Diploma	Advanced Studies Diploma
Modified Standard Diploma		

Appendix B

Table B.2
Ranked Exit Outcomes by Disability Types in 2006

Students identified as SLD	Students identified as ED	Students identified as OHI
Standard Diploma	Standard Diploma	Standard Diploma
Modified Standard Diploma	Dropout	Modified Standard Diploma
Special Diploma	Special Diploma	Dropout and GED
Dropout	Modified Standard Diploma	Special Diploma
Advanced Studies Diploma	Advanced Studies Diploma	Advanced Studies Diploma

Appendix C

Table C.3
Ranked Exit Outcomes by Disability Types in 2006

Students identified as SLD	Students identified as ED	Students identified as OHI
Standard Diploma	Standard Diploma	Standard Diploma
Modified Standard Diploma	Dropout	Dropout
Dropout	Modified Standard Diploma	Modified Standard Diploma and GED
Special Diploma and Advanced Studies Diploma	Special Diploma	Special Diploma
	Advanced Studies Diploma	Advanced Studies Diploma

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